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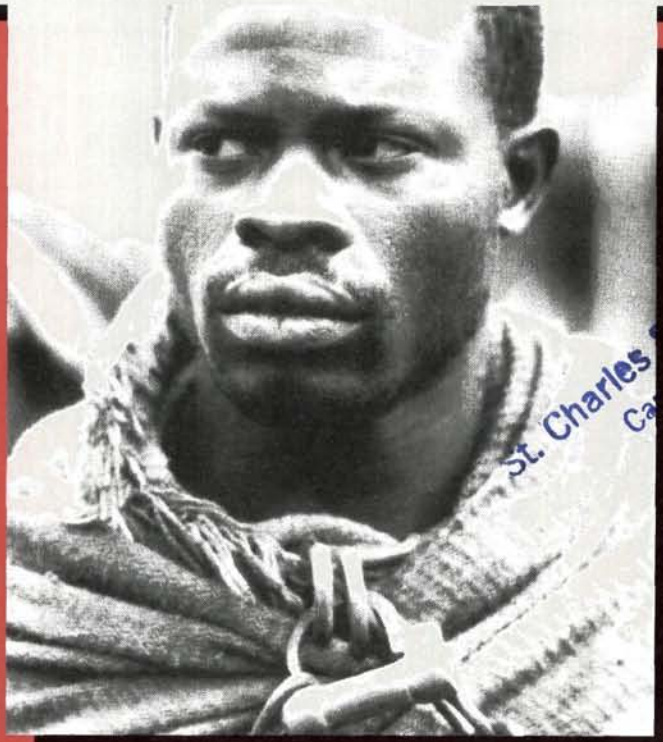

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MEA CULPA?

APOLOGIZE FOR SLAVERY?
GORDON MARINO

'AMISTAD'
RICHARD ALLEVA · ILAN STAVANS

AT HOME & ABROAD
PATRICK HALL · CLIFFORD THOMPSON

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To the Editors

The wet look

As a great admirer of Richard Alleva's movie criticism, I was pleased to see the headline on your January 16, 1998 cover, "Richard Alleva reviews Robert Duvall's *The Apostle*." I was even more excited, if a bit puzzled, by the dramat-

ic cover photograph that pictures this event. I've always wondered whether the drawing accompanying Alleva's reviews accurately captures his appearance. Now, however, I wonder why he works waist-deep in water rather than at a keyboard like the rest of us.

PETER STEINFELS
New York, N.Y.

Can't we all disagree?

Having belatedly read "Disputed Questions" [November 21, 1997], and after rereading Eugene McCarraher's "Smile, When You Say 'Laity'" [September 21, 1997], I cannot see why you had any difficulty in deciding to publish the article in the first place. Judging from the response, the article made people think. It inspired a lot of meditation and cogitation.

Isn't that why *Commonweal* exists? It's certainly why I subscribe. I appreciate reading views that do not always coincide with mine, and I especially appreciate the responses to the articles. It is only when we are given the opportunity to question and then investigate that we can achieve our potential and can come to appreciate the glorious wonder of God's creation.

Please, do not ever sidestep the controversial.

ROBERT E. TOBIN
Yonkers, N.Y.

Faulting Mother Teresa

Regarding your defense [Correspondence, December 5, 1997] of your editorial on Mother Teresa [September 26], I concur that sound journalism requires an honest, even-handed presentation. It is, however, intriguing that your criticisms of Mother Teresa are based on her espousing—and proclaiming in word and action—teachings of the church!

Perhaps the heroic example of this frail woman, who found the strength to serve the poorest of the poor through a life devoted to her Eucharistic Lord and his church, provides an invitation for us to re-examine our own opinions and agendas through the penetrating lens of faith.

LEON J. SUPRENANT, JR.
Steubenville, Ohio

The writer is vice-president and secretary of Catholics United for the Faith.

'Caring' vs. 'curing'

Though I have subscribed to your remarkable magazine for more than twenty years, this is my first comment to the editors. It is prompted by Mary Poplin's perceptive article, "No Humanitarian: A Portrait of Mother Teresa" [December 19, 1997]. It is easy to overlook the subtle distinction between the acts of the compassionate, spirit-centered person and those of the "humanitarian." I am reminded of the words of the late Henri Nouwen, which I paraphrase: It is important that we "care for" as opposed to "cure" those in need, for in caring we are "sharing with," while to cure often reflects the posture of the strong toward the weak, serving mainly to demean the recipient.

Ms. Poplin makes clear that the awareness of and response to the needs of others become the opportunity for each of the Missionaries of Charity to fulfill her own life goals. Truly, it is the consistency of effort, in small, humble, yet meaningful ways ("to do small things with great love") that has enshrined Mother Teresa in the hearts of the world.

I have a Jesuit friend who directs a center for terminal AIDS patients. Never has he asked his residents how they acquired the virus. The Missionaries follow a similar rule. How wise; for the answer to the question is irrelevant to the need. The energy expended by the public sector on documentation, qualification, and verification serve (in Poplin's words) to "distance the server from the served"; and, even more significantly, to "distance the server from his or her own life mission."

Or, as Thomas Merton wrote, "In a word, the whole Christian life consists in seeking the will of God by loving faith and carrying out that blessed will by faithful love." May the disciples of Mother Teresa continue their splendid efforts.

JOHN LESCROART
North Palm Beach, Fla.

Beware Vidal

New Year's greetings, and thanks for the information and insights your magazine has given me in the past year. And the beat goes on: I've just mailed photocopies of items from the issue of January 16, 1998 to several people who may be interested.

The anti-Zahn letter [Correspondence, December 5, 1997] is a reminder that there are many who do not appreciate the extraordinary heroism of conscientious objectors like Zahn, who went against everything being said by our leaders and even against the advice of his own church and comrades in order to do what he thought right.

A footnote: In a recent issue of the

(Continued on page 4)

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COMMONWEAL

February 13, 1998 / Volume CXXV, Number 3

UP FRONT

Correspondence *Short takes on many topics* 2

Editorial *Ancient warriors* 5
Who knows? 6

Postcard from Havanna
Mary Pat Kelly 6

Notebook *A death in the family*
Patrick Jordan 7

COLUMNISTS

Love is the measure
John Garvey
It's as necessary and as natural as gravity. 8

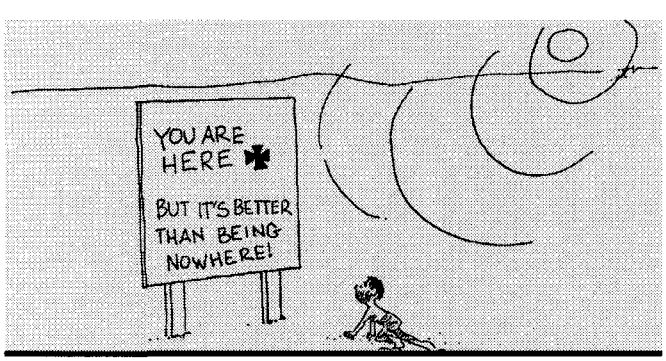
Re: Clinton & Lewinsky
E.J. Dionne, Jr. 9

ARTICLES

APOLOGIZE FOR SLAVERY?
Gordon Marino
Let's acknowledge our ill-gotten gains. 11

HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS
Joseph D. Policano
An exhibit raises questions about the German army in World War II, and the sparks fly. 12

BLACK & AMERICAN: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
Clifford Thompson
A search for identity. 15



POETRY

At the Fancy Feet Boutique with My Punk Ballerina
Margaret C. Szumowski 14

VERDICTS

SCREEN

Amistad
Titanic
Richard Alleva 17

The battle for words
Ilan Stavans
Translators to the rescue. 18

STAGE

The American Clock
A View from the Bridge
Celia Wren
The hallowing of memory in Arthur Miller's work. 20

BOOKS

The End of the Novel of Love
by Vivian Gornick
Sara Maitland 22

Bob the Gambler
by Frederick Barthelme
Valerie Sayers 24

Authority
by Eugene Kennedy & Sara C. Charles
The Problem of Trust
by Adam Seligman
Carl L. Bankston III 25

Commonweal Associates
A short thank you and a long list. 27

THE LAST WORD

Black & blue
Patrick Hall 31

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(Continued from page 2)

New York Review of Books, Gore Vidal tells us that novel reading is dead. If you don't tell your reviewers, they will continue to recommend the enjoyable works I learn about in your pages.

JOSEPH QUINTON
Lake Worth, Fla.

We did it first

In his excellent article, "So What's Catholic about It?" [January 16, 1998], Luke Timothy Johnson writes that the historical-critical method was derived from Protestantism. That bothers me a little. It was an Oblate priest, Richard Simon (1638-1712), who inaugurated the historical-critical method in his three-volume *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1678). Bossuet and other French theologians were highly critical of his work and forced the Holy Office to put it on the Index.

It was probably the turmoil occasioned by the Protestant Reformation that explains the hostility of Catholic theologians toward Simon. Protestant scholars picked up on Simon's work and developed it. It is only in this sense that it can be said that the method derived from Protestantism.

(REV.) JOHN A. WEIHRER
Houston, Tex.

Habeas corpus?

Congratulations to Abigail McCarthy for her tribute to Ambassador Lindy Boggs, a fine public servant ["Active Duty," January 16, 1998]. Quite surprising, though, was her report that among the guests at the festivities surrounding Boggs's swearing-in were "Katherine Graham and Millie [Mrs. 'Tip'] O'Neill, Linda Johnson Robb and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, *and their husbands*" [italics added].

As a fan of Tip O'Neill, I would like to believe that, in one sense at least, Mrs. O'Neill's and Mrs. Graham's late husbands were on hand. But, though Ambassador Boggs is a woman of considerable power and influence, McCarthy is the first to report that she can restore life to the dead.

McCarthy may have been swept up in the emotion of her friend's new appointment, but do the editors have the same excuse?

ALBERT C. PIERCE
Alexandria, Va.

From the editors: The editors have no excuse but can provide one for the author: the comma before "and their husbands" was a copy editor's unwarranted addition. Our, comma, apologies.

'Literally' & literacy

Call me old-fashioned, but I bridle at the current usage of *literally* to mean *really* or *actually*, or simply to add emphasis, as in your author Mary Poplin's assertion that the Missionaries of Charity "literally believe that God provides all that is needed through prayer" ["No Humanitarian," December 19, 1997]. Can one believe anything literally? One can, and many do, believe in a literal reading of the Bible, but that is something different from literally believing.

Unless "literally" is used to make a distinction from "figuratively," it's probably being misused. I literally believe such imprecision harms communication.

ROGER BERGMAN
Omaha, Nebr.

From the editors: Well, yes. And no. The first definition of "literally" in our American Heritage Dictionary says it means "in a literal or strict sense." But it cites a sentence by Craig Claiborne—"There are people in the world who literally do not know how to boil water"—to illustrate a second meaning: "really, actually." A usage note adds, however, that it's incorrect to say "he was literally breathing fire," where the word is used to mean "figuratively," which is "almost the opposite of its true meaning." Literarily speaking, we believe Ms. Poplin successfully communicated what the Missionaries of Charity truly believe about prayer. *Comprende?*

I found you!

Thank you so much for including your e-mail and website information in recent issues. After reading a letter to the editors about the new site in the September 12, 1997 issue, I spent a fruitless hour or so first combing the entire issue looking for some clue about where to point my browser, and then searching for you on Yahoo, Lycos, and AltaVista. You might want to submit the URL to those search engines to help others who are trying to locate your site.

The site, by the way, looks great, and I'm looking forward to using it often.

DANIELLE AMATO
La Jolla, Calif.

From the production editor: We have recently submitted sixty-plus key words to all the major search engines, including those you've mentioned. If you try searching again after reading this reply, it's likely that you'll find us at home.

TIINA ALEMAN

Housing in the Holy Land

Thanks for the editorial, "Fleeing Bethlehem" [December 19, 1997]. It is a great service to the U.S. Catholic community to keep us posted on events in the Holy Land, since things there are not always what they seem to be. For Christians in the Holy Land, housing is a major concern. It is important for your readers to know about such difficulties. Coverage of these matters by the U.S. media is extremely poor.

BROTHER DAVID CARROLL, F.S.C.
New York, N.Y.

The writer is assistant to the secretary general of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

Correction ■ Because of the poor penwomanship of one editor and the benighted eyesight of another, Elena Cabral's name was misspelled in the January 30 issue of *Commonweal*. We apologize.

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Ancient warriors

Pope John Paul II and President Fidel Castro, after long and arduous negotiations, finally greeted each other on Cuban soil. There was something dramatic, even touching, in their meeting, ancient warriors engaged in battle, yet remarkably courteous and deferential. There were the small gestures: the increasingly frail pontiff was offered a vessel of Cuban earth to kiss in place of the airport tarmac; Mr. Castro helped the pope to a chair at the welcoming ceremonies; the two met privately at the Palace of the Revolution; Mr. Castro unexpectedly attended the pope's Mass in Havana. Then, there was the larger point of the visit: disputation, indirect to be sure, but disputation nonetheless over moral issues of the kind that ought to engage world leaders about economic justice, the moral ordering of society, and religious and civil liberties. The pope told the Cuban people to become the "agents of their own history," and he urged Mr. Castro to free political prisoners.

Though his mentors in the Soviet Union have long since thrown in the towel, Mr. Castro clings to power over a miserably failed economy and an unraveling social fabric. His self-justifications to the pope—that they both care for the fate of the poor, that they both seek social justice, that the church of prerevolutionary Cuba was repressive and intolerant—had the effect of pointing to the injustices of Mr. Castro's own government and an economy that cannot support Cuba's citizens. If Mr. Castro sees any irony in this, he gives no sign of it. The Catholic church though, once guilty as charged, is a changed and chastened church.

Can the pope's visit serve as precursor to a peaceful and just transition in Cuba? It is tantalizing to apply the lessons of John Paul's visits to Poland, but of course Cuba's own history is far different. So too is the historically marginal relationship of the Catholic church to the Cuban people. Above all, the United States, a friend of Poland, has not been a friend of Cuba. Through the embargo imposed in 1961, the U.S. government hoped to drive Castro from power. Instead we have abetted the mismanagement of the Cuban economy by denying Cuba any form of economic exchange with the United States—its natural trading partner. The more recent Helms-Burton Act reinforces these strictures. Though very tight, this stranglehold has proved useless in either bringing down Castro or changing his ideology. Unlike Iraq, where economic sanctions are also in place, Cuba poses no threat to its neighbors or anyone else. John Paul II was clear in calling for an end to the U.S. embargo of Cuba—a point acknowledged by President Bill Clinton, who admitted that the pope was able to say things that American politicians can not.

The pope's visit and the transitional state of Cuban society make it clear that it is time to lift the embargo and the hammerlock in which Cuban exiles hold U.S. policy. Yes, there are moral reasons to do this. But there are very practical ones as well. Those who have suffered under communism in Cuba should not have to suffer the onslaughts of an unleashed free market that would likely be dominated by wealthy Cubans returning from abroad after Castro is gone. The sacrifices exacted from the Cuban people by both Mr. Castro and the embargo cannot be left unredeemed. Fidel Castro and the United States government should both change their policies. And who better to tell them than that inveterate traveler and teacher, John Paul II.

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WHO KNOWS?

It looks as though the nation will have Bill Clinton to kick around a while longer.

On Topic A we know nothing more than we read in the newspapers and see on television (nobody's leaking to *Commonweal*). Which is to say that what we "know" is a mass of contradictions. We hope that Mr. Clinton did not have sex—any kind of sex—with a White House intern. We hope that he did not ask her to lie. As we write on February 3, the impeachment of Mr. Clinton appears unlikely. He could resign if he is found "not innocent," but we doubt he will be so found, even though he may be guilty of something—or other. Enough said.

On Topics B, C, D, this should be said:

- Topic B: The Office of the Independent Counsel was established to thwart the abuse of executive privilege. Mr. Kenneth Starr, the Whitewater prosecutor, after expending three-and-a-half years and millions of dollars, has succeeded only in exposing the corruption of Arkansas politics. He has yet to find an indictable offense by the president. No, Mr. Starr is not part of a right-wing conspiracy. Yet, the pursuit of rumor-mongering, fueled by the well-oiled machinery of Clinton-bashers, hardly does credit to the office or purpose of the independent counsel. If Mr. Starr does not find an indictable offense, it's time for someone to call an end to what looks like a fishing expedition for minnows. It is also time either to revise the independent-counsel law or to let it expire.
- Topic C: The media will self-flagellate about the frenzied coverage even as the coverage continues. Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania, appearing on the "News Hour with Jim Lehrer," offered this astute rundown: The news is ahead of the story. Few reported "facts" are verified. Probably ten reporters in Washington have good sources for this story; this leaves a thousand to create the feeding frenzy. Conclusion: for all of the coverage, we know very little. Remedy: more self-flagellation, more self-criticism, and more genuine reporting.
- Topic D: The American people, thus far, reserve judgment but in a paradoxical manner. Opinion polls show that many do not believe the president's denials, yet his standing in the polls has never been higher. Is it favor-the-underdog sentiment? Indifference to sexual sins? Overload on high dudgeon? Or is it simply an invocation of the common law principle, innocent until proven guilty in a court of law?

Under the circumstances, the latter is a sound principle.

POSTCARD FROM HAVANA

"And now I turn you over to the Cuban people," the young woman from the Ministry of Tourism said, gesturing toward Havana's Plaza of the Revolution where hundreds of thousands waited for Mass to begin. Her words were meant kindly—and, for me, it worked. I had expected our trip, put together in Miami at the last minute, would be a circumscribed experience. We (cardinals, bishops, priests, and lay people) would fly to Havana at 5 A.M., go straight to the Mass, and return immediately after. Our first attempt to land in Havana ended in a scary maneuver. I assured myself: no plane with so much ecclesiastical purple on it could crash.

Tour buses met us, complete with young women in red flight-attendant uniforms. On the brief drive to Havana, we drew alongside a caravan of rickety buses from San Luis. Their passengers held small homemade paper flags. We were soon exchanging peace signs and thumbs up. One of our group wrote "*Viva El Papa*." Nods and applause.

The altar was five football fields away, and the crowd was enormous. Standing at the edge, I saw many families with children and groups of teen-agers wearing tee shirts that said, "*Juan Pablo II: Mensajero De La Verdad La Esperanza*." There were no vendors and nothing for sale. I got my flags from an older black man, a self-appointed distributor. Just then, the San Luis bus group arrived carrying yellow balloons and processed toward the front with a little Samba in their steps. I followed. They picked up the rhythm of the chanting crowd, "Juan Pablo our friend, Cuba is with you," and "With the pope, Cuba has hope." The procession dissolved against a wall of people. But a man in a red-and-white striped shirt was skillfully guiding two boys ever forward, so I stuck with them until the crowd became impenetrable. When he saw me try to take a picture, he put his son up on his shoulders, gestured for me to give him the camera, and the boy photographed the crowd and the altar. A woman handed me a pamphlet with the hymns and I joined in the singing. When the pope arrived, the crowd waved the flags wildly, screaming "Christ is present" and "*Cuba siempre Católica*." I have since read news reports that people were unfamiliar with the Mass. Not at all. Most people sang without referring to the printed words. So many went to Communion that they ran out; the Eucharist was shared.

To a young man in a Florida Marlins baseball cap, I tried in my bad Spanish, "*Hernandez, bueno*." In English, he replied, "Yes and the Mets have a Cuban too!" He also reported that there had been speculation among Cubans about Fidel's private meeting with the pope. "Perhaps Fidel has gone to...," he searched for the English. "To forgiveness," he said.

"*Esperanza*" was the theme of the day, that and a fervent desire for an end to isolation. The pope got one of his biggest cheers when he called for Cuba to open up to the world. These hospitable people certainly seemed ready. By the end of the Mass, I knew the tour guide had done me a great favor in turning me over to the Cuban people.

MARY PAT KELLY

Mary Pat Kelly, inveterate traveler and frequent Commonweal *contributor, is author of the novel,* Special Intentions *(Dublin: New Island, 1997).*

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Patrick Jordan

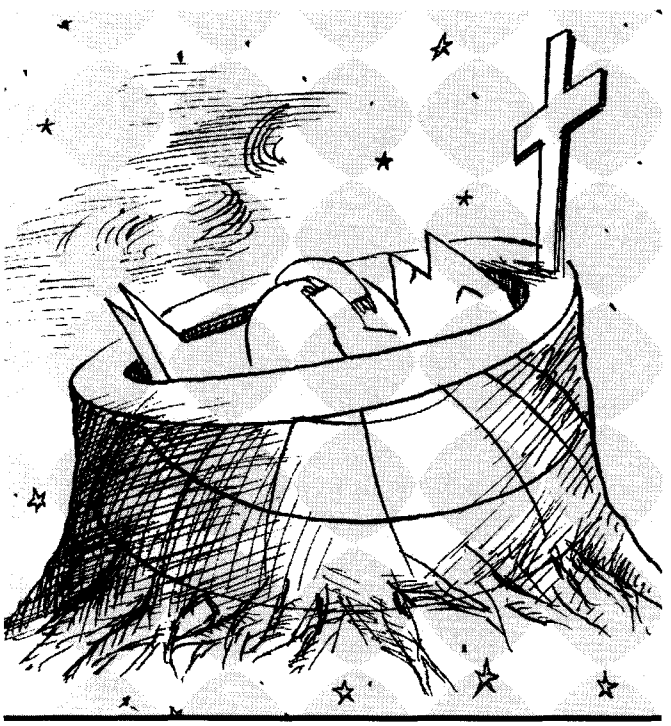
A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Ivan F. Alava, R.I.P.

Carmen Alava is *Commonweal*'s first person of welcome, a presence willing and helpful—on the phone, to each one who crosses our office threshold, and to those of us who work with her. At 3 A.M. New Year's morning, she and her husband Freddy were awakened by an emergency call asking them to rush across the Hudson to Newark, where Freddy's brother, Ivan, had been shot while driving his cab. Carmen doesn't recall how the two of them made their way to the hospital; they drove in a daze. But when they arrived at the emergency room, the faces of family and Ivan's fellow taxi drivers told them what they feared most: Ivan F. Alava, thirty-five and the father of four, was dead, *fallecio tragicamente en la ciudad de Newark, el primero de enero*, the first murder victim of 1998.

We at the office did not know Ivan. But we knew other family members, and had heard of Ivan's efforts to create a life for his family. Two years ago he and his wife Socorro had begun to buy a house in Bloomfield, near Newark. Their children range in age from nine to six months. Six years earlier, Ivan and Socorro had made the long journey to *el norte* from their native Ecuador, to recreate the American Dream. They would work hard and eventually spend blood to prove again that opportunity has its rewards.

At first they lived with Carmen and her family in cramped quarters in Manhattan's Washington Heights. In Carmen's words, Ivan was the "charismatic one" of the three Alava brothers: outgoing, energetic, inventive, concerned for others. He was soon known on the streets for his winning way in retailing laminated articles, particularly watches that sport the face of a loved one beneath the hands of the timepiece. Soon it was on to Newark, and work among the strong Ecuadoran community there.



Coming from a family of mechanics, well-versed in the resuscitation of rundown cars, Ivan found working for a taxi company a natural. But with the job came the harsh experience that this land of the Dream is also a place of exploitation. Never one to be intimidated, Ivan often appeared at Newark's City Hall, speaking before the taxi commission or defending some fellow immigrant's rights. Finally, disenchanted by the hacks for whom he drove, he led his fellow drivers in a walkout, and together they formed their own cooperative livery company: a twenty-four hour service, of which Ivan was elected the first president.

The rest was work, work, driving work, from 6 in the morning until 2 or 3 the following day. Socorro would tell of Ivan waking the children at 3 A.M., just to see them. She begged him to slow down. He gave up the presidency, but was still called at all hours for advice. Why had he even resigned, she wondered.

On weekends, Carmen and Freddy worked for the cooperative. Carmen's father even took to accompanying passengers, just to make their trip more hospitable. It is that sort of service, where good conversation and stories from home make for a better time. Would that Ivan had had such a companion accompanying him on New Year's Eve. Two young men have been charged in the robbery-murder, one eighteen years old.

At the wake, the grief of the widow was restrained but immeasurable and searing. The funeral home, but a soccer punt from the taxi station Ivan had established, was overheated and packed. When it opened its doors, the mourners stretched for two blocks in the January cold. Inside, the family sat in an ashen line, bent beneath condolences and the onslaught of the local media, for whom they had become the first victim-family of the year. A number of churches had sent their representatives to bring solace, spiritual and material. Small envelopes were proffered to the widow. At one point she was forced to stand and pose for a photograph that would be flashed back to Ecuador, she holding a recent photograph of Ivan and the family. It was like seeing Veronica holding up the veil.

Then a young evangelical preacher arrived. He asked to speak and was accorded the privilege. All stood in the moldering hall as he read from the Gospel of John, and then sat respectfully as he declaimed on the remarkable impact of Christ's saving act. In the face of violence, he said, it is the only answer.

I don't know how consoling his message was to the family, but it moved me. The young man's sincerity was exercised with unassuming conviction. Even without the benefit of priestly office, he manifested a gentle authority.

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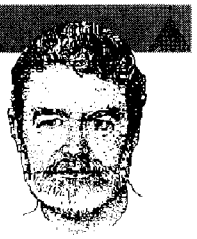
Ivan had had a personal devotion to *Nuestra Señora de El Cisne*, the patroness of Loja, Ecuador. He was buried the next day from Saint Michael's Church, where there is a special shrine to her. Her visage graces his laminated funeral card on one side, Ivan's serious, now eternally young face on the other. It is the sort of card one sees hanging from the rearview mirrors in some Gypsy cabs: a prayer in plastic, made to endure and to shield from tears.

Now the new year is very old. Life continues. The widow has four small orphans to cherish but only her husband's ashes and broken dreams to console her. What endures is the senselessness of the murder and the longing for Ivan to rouse them all at 3 A.M. For the rest of us—who never rode with Ivan—there is a yearning for the young preacher's assurance: for an understanding of forgiveness, and some release from outrage. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

JOHN GARVEY



LOVE IS THE MEASURE

From the particular to the universal

First, two poems—one from the beginning of (more or less) modern English, the other contemporary.

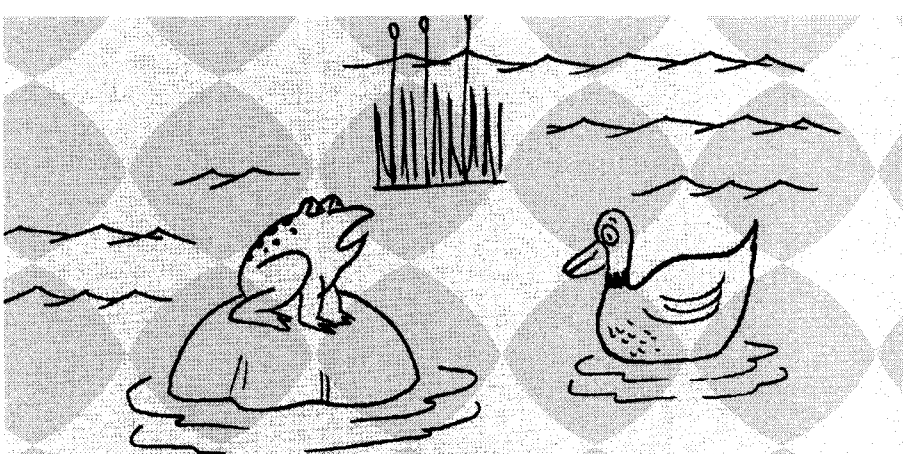
Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

This was written by the always prolific Anonymous, probably during the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The next:

Wide, wide, in the rose's side
Sleeps a child without sin,
And any man who loves in this world
Stands here on guard over him.

This was written by the American poet Kenneth Patchen in 1957. What fascinates me about both poems is that although they are separated by four hundred years, they are metrically similar; both are also about love (which, Yeats said, is the only thing other than death that adults can take seriously), and have an immediate power. One is about a specific and erotic longing, the other about something equally specific, but it moves from the specific to the abstract in a fierce and wonderful way that reminds me of Blake, as much of Patchen's work does. The importance of these poems for me is not only literary, but has to do with how we think of love—the particular love we have for the one we want to take into our arms, which has to do with larger loves.

Although love in practice can be the most complicated thing in the world, it is not hard for us to understand at one level. Whether we talk about the love of husband for wife or parent for child, there is something helpless about love, something that takes us out of ourselves whether we like it or not. Infatuation, often the beginning of erotic love, can be overwhelming and distressing, inconvenient. The love of a parent for a child is not a choice; it is a force that impinges itself on your life. Even abused children understand at some level that their parents *should* love them, and want to love the abusive parent. The bitterness that leads to further abuse, as in the case of the abused child who grows into an abusive parent, is a reaction to a profound betrayal, a betrayal of something primordial. There is here something close to an absolute: The person to whom evil has been done knows that the world should not be this way, that things are meant to be different, that real love never behaves like this....Love is in this sense like gravity, and where it should be and is not there is the sense of something against the grain, something unnatural.



"I may look like a frog to you, but I have the genetic make up of a prince."

I remember a lame defense of clerical celibacy that went something like this: The married man or woman loves one person, and the celibate is freed to love all persons equally. There are good arguments for celibacy (at least for monks and nuns, if not for parish priests) but this is not one of them. A person who has not loved a particular person is not capable of loving anyone, much less many people. That love need not be erotic, but it has to be for a particular person. Love doesn't exist "in general." "Western Wind" shows us a specific, erotic yearning; "Wide, Wide, in the Rose's Side" shows us a child, and from the child we go to all love, to anyone who loves—but it begins with one bit of flesh, bone, and beating heart.

In John's account of the Last Supper,

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Jesus tells his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love....This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"(John 15: 9, 12). And Matthew 25 makes it clear that this love must take concrete form: Whatever we do for "the least of these my brethren" is done for the Lord. And we will be judged for what we have failed to do for the Lord if we fail to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those who are in prison. What is important is that the people being rewarded, as well as those who are being punished, do not know when they have done, or failed to do, something for the Lord. The righteous and unrighteous alike ask, "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, in prison?" Any true act of compassion—whether done for consciously Christian reasons or not, and for that matter whether done by a Christian or not—is a work in which the love of God is incarnate. And it is on the basis of these acts of love that we will be judged, and, according to Matthew 25, this incarnate love is the only criterion for our judgment.

I heard a report on National Public Radio recently that told of a remarkable example of compassion. The reporter, Diana Nyad, was part of a cycling tour of Vietnam; the tour included a number of veterans who had been wounded in Vietnam. During a meeting with Vietnamese schoolchildren, one of the tour members who had suffered terrible injuries was asked about his worst memory of the war. Most of the listeners expected him to speak of his own injuries; instead, he told of entering a village with orders to kill the first person he met who could spread the alarm about the advancing American troops. The first person he encountered was a boy of about eight, who was armed, and as the veteran tried to tell the story, he wept: He killed the child. One of the children, seeing his tears, began to weep too, and went over to him and put her arms around him. I have no idea if she was a Buddhist, a Christian, or an atheist, but the compassionate love of God was certainly present in that moment, and in the specific gesture of taking the weeping man in her arms. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

E.J. DIONNE, Jr.

RE: CLINTON & LEWINSKY

Breaking the news or making the news?

Many parents have had to confront the question I had from my son: What did President Clinton do wrong?

The potentially lethal scandal in which the president finds himself will force everyone to figure out his or her own answer. If the allegations are even partly true, we will once again engage the messy questions involving the relationship between a politician's sexual life and his public character, the press's role in reporting on such matters, and the obligations of politicians to be honest about what they do, even in private.

We will grapple with these not as abstract issues, but as concrete questions about Bill Clinton. Even if your predisposition is not to care or want to know about a politician's sex life, hadn't Clinton implicitly promised Americans that he would spare us from further spectacles? Given all the forces at work to bring him down, wouldn't new sexual adventures be dangerously reckless?

To answer these questions, of course, we'll need to know more than the president has told us. If Clinton had no sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, the controversy melts away. Clinton would have no need to perjure himself or encourage her to lie. The answer would be refreshingly simple: The president did nothing wrong. If the charges are false, all he would need to do is deal with the specific details that have emerged: How well did he know Lewinsky? Did he spend much time with her? Did he send her gifts? If so, why? Did he leave her phone messages? These things are either true or they're not. They either have innocent explanations or they don't.

But turn to the possibility many of the president's friends fear: that he did have some sort of sexual relationship with Lewinsky and has lied about it. Is that a hanging offense?

Put aside for a moment what could really get the president into legal trouble—not the relationship itself, but that he may have lied about it under oath. And that, worse still, he or his agents encouraged Lewinsky to lie. What about? Well, sex.

I've heard it said, and not just by Clinton supporters: Who cares with whom the president sleeps? Is that our business? If he's a good president and the affairs are consensual, what difference does it make? And why in the world does the press love to report on this stuff? In truth, most of the press does not love to report on this stuff, a point made by Clinton's

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opponents. They contend that mainstream reporters (with a few exceptions) have consistently downplayed or ignored the president's sex life. Mostly, the press wanted the stories to go away.

The critics' read of the press is right, though they're wrong if they think reporters avoid such stories because of any political sympathy for Clinton. The truth is plainer: Most reporters and columnists did not get into this business to write about sex. When the press does write about the sex life of a public figure, it's almost always done in the name of some other value—whether he's being honest or not, whether he's harassed a woman or not, whether he abused power or not, whether he's "compulsive" or "reckless."

I've thought about this question more than I wanted to because I'm the reporter to whom Gary Hart issued his "follow me around" challenge in 1987. He was responding to my own fumbling, uncomfortable questions about his personal life during an interview for a *New York Times Magazine* profile that I was writing. By the time I posed my questions, the issue of Hart's infidelities had already entered print, ginned up by some of his opponents' aides but raised also by journalists themselves.

Before the whole Hart business broke, the subject of what journalists should report about Hart's personal life was a regular topic of debate at dinners among reporters. Many who had covered Hart in the 1984 presidential campaign (I did not) saw his sexual behavior as—these were the popular words then, too—"compulsive" and "reckless." Many of these reporters thought politicians deserved a zone of privacy, but worried that this could lead in some cases to a kind of cover-up, an informal conspiracy of silence.

I still lean more to the "I really don't want to know" school and remain uneasy with my minor role in changing the journalistic conventions on covering matters sexual. Still, I had to ask Hart the questions if my portrait of him was going to be honest. I knew that Hart's aides and close supporters worried about the public impact of his private behavior. If they were worried, perhaps the rest of us should be worried, too.

Hart made it easy on everyone when he invited us to follow him around. *Miami Herald* reporters did—on the very weekend my magazine profile appeared. They uncovered his relationship with Donna Rice. Hart subsequently quit the 1988 race.

The worst thing about the Hart eruption is that it short-circuited a real debate about the link between sexuality and public service. Given Hart's strong statements, any reporting on his sex life could be justified in the name of unmasking "hypocrisy." That opens up a lot of ground, since few people, public or private, broadcast their affairs.

No one studied this history more closely than Bill Clinton. In1991 he sought to close off press inquiries by ever so delicately proclaiming that he was not a hypocrite. In September, before he announced his presidential candidacy, Clinton had breakfast with a group of journalists. Clinton lieutenants urged reporters to ask him about his personal life. While they were reluctant, someone finally popped the question. Here's what Clinton said: "Like nearly anybody who has been together for twenty years, our relationship has not been perfect or free from difficulties, but we feel good about where we are and we believe in our obligation to each other, and we intend to be together thirty or forty years from now, whether I run for president or not."

It was masterful. Clinton didn't quite admit anything, but made clear he wasn't pretending anything either. He effectively shut off discussion of sex until Gennifer Flowers announced in January 1992 that she and Clinton had had a long affair. Even then, the September statement served him well: Clinton could always say that he had already said his past behavior hadn't been perfect.

But these are the seeds of his current problem: Clinton never explicitly promised to be faithful to his wife, but he suggested that his present and future would be different from his past. My hunch is that even Americans who might be forgiving of an indiscretion wanted Clinton to promise them that whatever he had done before, there would be no new public embarrassments and media circuses.

It's hard to imagine that Clinton did not know that he risked precisely this if he had affairs in the White House. The very enemies Clinton often railed against would not let such conduct pass unnoticed, if they ever got wind of it. And when the Supreme Court let Paula Jones's sexual harassment case move forward, it turned the personal into the legal.

Once Clinton failed to settle the case out of court, he was trapped. He would have to give a deposition and his conduct, both past and present, could be open to scrutiny by everyone. If he did have any more affairs and lied about them under oath, he would be guilty of perjury. If he told the truth, he risked a new media frenzy when the facts leaked out. He would have broken the implicit pact he made to stick to the right and true—or at least to keep things quiet. For all the problems, truth telling remains the better alternative. If no lying or perjury is involved, then the story is about sex. And about sex, the American people have shown a certain mercy.

What did Clinton do wrong? My hope would be that sometime very soon, I can tell my son: nothing at all. My fear is that won't be true. If this affair did happen, a powerful, middle-aged president slept with a very young aide. That this has been done before is a poor rationalization. In doing so, he risked his presidency at its most promising moment. He embarrassed himself, his family, and his country. He will have lied, set up circumstances in which he knew he would have to lie, and he may have done so under oath.

High crimes and misdemeanors? Certainly there's no comparison with the Watergate break-ins and attempted subversion of the election process. Especially in the absence of a perjury charge, there is something dreadful and sadly comic in even contemplating an impeachment rooted in a sexual affair. But whatever happens to Clinton, if this story is true, the answer is yes, he did something wrong, and something stupid, and something sad. I hope it didn't happen. □

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APOLOGIZE FOR SLAVERY?

Facing up to the living past

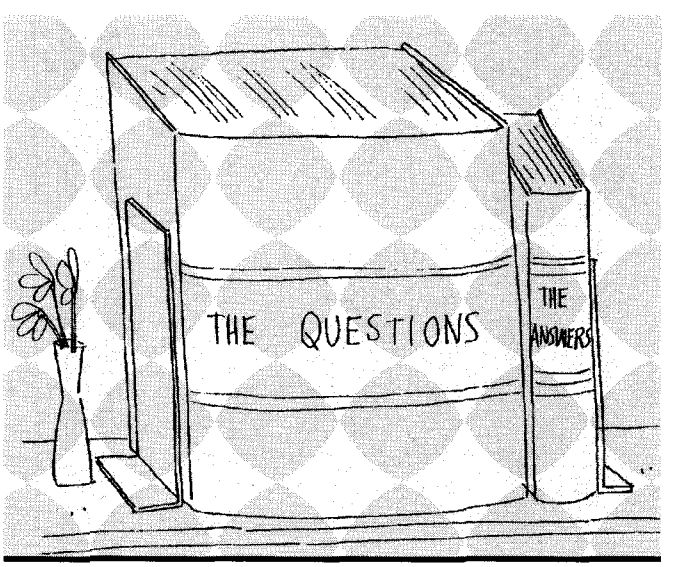
Gordon Marino

For reasons that would be interesting to explore, gestures of collective repentance have recently become quite popular. In 1994, the pope offered an apology for past sins committed by the church against non-Catholics. In the summer of 1995, the Southern Baptists, who number over 15 million, voted to express a resolution of repentance which read in part, "We lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest." British Prime Minister Tony Blair has apologized for England's indifference to the plight of the Irish during the Potato Famine, and in January the Canadian government formally apologized for its historic mistreatment of indigenous peoples. Last year, President Bill Clinton apologized on behalf of We the People to the African-Americans who were the unwitting subjects in the infamous Tuskegee study on syphilis, and seriously considered the possibility of apologizing for slavery in general. The president subsequently called for a "national conversation" about race, and appointed a commission to promote such a conversation.

Reactions to Clinton's initial proposed *mea culpa* varied. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said he probably would not favor an official apology, "because I think we should be looking to the future, talking about things we need to do to work together." Ward Connerly, an African-American entrepreneur, regent of the University of California, and architect of the California anti-affirmative action referendum, Proposition 209, pronounced this verdict on the idea: "Apologizing for slavery is probably one of the dumbest things anyone could do." Offering a more muted criticism, the Reverend Jesse Jackson remarked that an apology would have "no substantive value." He then went on to warn that such gestures could "divert attention away from our ability to, in fact, close the gap [between whites and African-Americans] with real structure and investment." On the other hand, the civil rights leader Julian Bond maintained that an apology for slavery would be a good and important symbolic gesture. And the recent release of Steven Speilberg's *Amistad* has made the history and moral legacy of slavery a vibrant issue yet again.

Last summer, in between Little League baseball games in a largely white Minnesota town, I did some informal polling of my own. Though none of the people I talked to took the president's proposed apology to be an urgent matter, about half expressed mild support for the idea. Others scoffed at repenting for what they took to be ancient history. The wife of a professor commented, "Why should I apologize for something done to blacks more than a hundred years ago?" A fair question which might be restated: "Why should I apologize for a crime that I had nothing to do with?" Or more to the point, "By what authority can I apologize for someone else's actions?" It would, after all, be hubristic for me to think that I could repent for a mugging in which I did not participate. Likewise, it would be absurd to pretend that I could repent for slaveholders and traders who themselves refused to repent.

As a professor of philosophy, over the years I have encountered many white students who accurately or paranoically believe that they are constantly being asked to feel guilty and repent for racist institutions and actions in which they themselves had no hand. When it comes to race and repentance, these students are of the Aristotelian opinion that we should be praised or blamed only for our own voluntary actions. Here it should be observed that, oddly enough, many of them feel no qualms about taking pride in the accomplishments of the various communities with which they identify, such as their college, fellow countrymen, townsfolk, church brethren, or for that matter, members of their local



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major league baseball team. And yet, the logic of their claim that responsibility only extends as far as one's own free will would seem to militate against the idea of any form of ego-enhancement derived from the accomplishments of others.

This minor inconsistency aside, many who sneer or snarl at the suggestion of apologizing for deeds from the deep past need to consider the possibility that we may bear a moral connection to actions that we did not ourselves commit. In this regard, it would be useful to distinguish between actions that one neither commits nor profits from and actions not committed but profited from. Suppose, for example, that unbeknownst to me, a friend of mine robs a bank and makes off with $7 million. Clearly, I am neither responsible for the robbery nor am I in a position to apologize for it. However, if after telling me about the theft, I accept a million dollars of the stolen loot, then I am no longer innocent of the robbery, despite the fact that I had nothing at all do to with the heist. It could, I think, be argued that white people have profited from our racist past and thus, relative to slavery, we are more akin to receivers of stolen goods than we are to innocent bystanders who just happen to bear a physical likeness to slave owners.

No doubt some will reply that they are unaware of drawing any benefits from slavery and racism. This lack of awareness would be exculpatory if in fact slavery and discrimination did not serve the interests of whites. However, if ignorance of being privileged is an ignorance we ourselves are responsible for producing, then we become morally reproachable receivers of stolen goods. And to be psychologically realistic, whites have a strong investment in blinking at their assessment of the broad effects of racism. To return to my earlier example, let us assume that when I accepted the gift of a million dollars, I had no reason to think that the money had been stolen, but that years later I came to understand that the funds upon which I had built a comfortable and respectable life had been pilfered from the accounts of your great-grandparents. Would the fact that many years had gone by cover the sin to such a degree that I would not

Hitler's willing executioners

During the past two years, millions of Germans have been shocked—or so they claim—by an exhibition that documents systematic atrocities committed by the German army (*Wehrmacht*) during World War II. The exhibition's organizers say that after Auschwitz, the atrocities represent "the most barbaric chapter in German and Austrian history."

Since the end of the war, it has been virtual gospel in Germany that the *Wehrmacht* was "pure," free from the taint of Nazi war crimes. Starting in 1947, the *Wehrmacht* was glorified in German films and articles as an elite corps of honorable men who fought bravely for Germany. Sanitizing the *Wehrmacht* was not accidental. The cold war was starting and the Allies had use for the expertise former German generals could provide; the men who had recently fought the Soviets might be needed to fight them again.

Against this backdrop, a major research project and exhibition, created by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, examined for the first time the role of the German army, concentrating on three areas: the battle against the partisans in Serbia; the advance of the Sixth Army through the Ukraine toward Stalingrad; and the three-year occupation of Belorussia. Its conclusion: "The *Wehrmacht* played an active role in the Holocaust, in plundering the occupied territories, in murdering the civil populations *en masse*, and in exterminating Soviet prisoners of war. This was not a 'normal' war; it was planned and executed as an ethnic war. The *Wehrmacht*—and this is documented by the millions of people murdered beyond the actual battlefields—was a criminal organization."

The exhibition, "War of Extermination: *Wehrmacht* Crimes between 1941–44," includes gruesome photos of mass exterminations and individual murders committed by German soldiers. With correspondence and official orders of the period, it documents the planned murder of Soviet civilians, Jews, and POWs, and the violent retribution against the partisans fighting in Serbia.

The exhibition toured from March 1995 (and will continue through 1999) in German and Austrian cities, generating a lot of publicity and discussion, but no violence. That lasted until 1997, when the exhibition arrived in Munich. The city has a well-organized group of *Wehrmacht* veterans and is the birthplace of National Socialism. There, 5,000 aged ex-soldiers and their far-right supporters staged a riot against the exhibition, claiming the shocking pictures were Soviet forgeries and that the exhibition was being used by left-wing politicians and foreigners to further disgrace Germany. They were supported by members of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's coalition, the Christian Social Union.

I caught up with the exhibition this past October in the normally peaceful and enchanting college town of Marburg. The exhibit had not lost its power to politicize. About one hundred young men and women (who police told me were more left-wing *provocateurs* than students) and union members marched against a handful of neo-Nazi protesters picketing the exhibit. It was the marchers who attacked in a brief,

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bear any responsibility to the descendants of my great-grandparents' victims who, thanks to my ancestors, now led a distinctively unprivileged existence?

Individuals who benefit from a crime are mistaken in thinking that they have nothing to do with the crime. If responsibility does not extend from the robber baron to his children, then so long as the perpetrator of a crime can escape indictment by his immediate victim when he is alive, then the material benefits of his wrongdoing can be passed along with impunity to future generations.

Once again, it is essential to distinguish between cases in which one generation is entirely innocent of a transgression committed by an earlier generation, and those in which the sins of the father continue to bear fruits of advantage for his descendants. Although I am not sure that a presidential apology would have the healing effects that some anticipate, I do know that white Americans have profited from slavery and discrimination. In a competitive society we have always had a leg up on African-Americans, whether it be in hunting for a job, loan, house, or advancement in a corporate firm. If you do not believe me on the last count then consider the Texaco scandal in 1996 where unsuspecting white corporate executives were caught on tape espousing racist sentiments. Or consider a story that a friend shared with me. My friend, who is about thirty-five, recently returned to his hometown in a Detroit suburb for a class reunion at his richly integrated public high school. After the reunion, four of his old school chums persuaded him to go out and play a few golf holes. All were corporate executives and registered Democrats. And yet when the issue of race came up, all of them swore that they would never "take the risk" of hiring an African-American to fill a leadership role in their respective companies. In other words, any white applicants who sought employment in one of their firms would have a decisive advantage over all African-American applicants.

I was not involved in the civil rights struggle of the sixties. While I have huffed and puffed and shaken my head about racial injustice, I have made no significant sacrifices for the

wild melee that left a few bleeding heads before helmeted, club-swinging police broke it up. With several hundred police in place separating the two groups (additional rightists had arrived), the rest of the demonstration was boisterous but not violent.

Why does the exhibition evoke such strong feelings? The accepted explanation is that it tars 18 million German soldiers as criminals, a charge that disgraces the grandfathers of today and millions of sons, husbands, and brothers who died in the war. But walking through the exhibit, I realized there were elements of it that rekindled the worst memories of older Germans. The brutality was obvious. But now there was documentation explaining it: it was official Nazi policy to depopulate occupied areas of Slavs, and to replace them with Germans. *Lebensraum*—living space—jumps out at you throughout the exhibit. The Nazis justified their invasion of Slavic lands and the slaughter or displacement of its peoples to provide *lebensraum* for Germany.

Nazi Germany planned to kill or forcibly remove nearly 20 million Slavs. In fact, over 23 million Soviet citizens alone lost their lives in World War II, including nearly 3 million POWs who were systematically starved to death or shot by the German army which knew in advance—the documentation shows—they would be capturing that many Soviet soldiers and had no resources to hold them. And the German people bought into this dream. Hitler called the Slavs a "pygmy race," people who could be killed or enslaved or brutalized just as one would a beast of burden. The exhibition reminds older Germans of that policy, and the price they paid for endorsing it.

Since Marburg was a university town, I made a point of speaking with younger people about the exhibition. Were they shocked and ashamed? Typical was a twenty-seven-year-old dentist who shrugged it off: "I have a life to lead, and it does not include guilt for crimes my grandfather may have committed. It was a terrible thing those Germans did, and that is history forever. But we have tried to make restitution to victims. We have been a country of unparalleled principle since the war. I am opposed to the far right, to the skin heads and the anti-immigrant violence. But I have closed the curtain on what happened more than fifty years ago." While common, this attitude was not universal. Another young man, a medical student, seemed almost paralyzed with grief. He plans to work as a doctor in underdeveloped countries to expiate the Nazi crimes.

Are Germans really learning about the *Wehrmacht* crimes for the first time? One high-ranking Hessian police official told me he remembers his father returning home from the Eastern front. "Germany will suffer for one hundred years for what we did there," his father told him.

Negotiations are currently under way to bring the exhibit to the United States and other foreign countries.

JOSEPH D. POLICANO

Joseph D. Policano's most recent article for Commonweal *was "Letter from Iran" in the January 16, 1998 issue.*

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Margaret C. Szumowski

At the Fancy Feet Boutique with My Punk Ballerina

Black clothes, blackish-purple hair,
ears with seven holes.
This girl dresses like death's bailiff.
Every day a rain of toads and locusts.
Is she someone for paradise?
She tries on shoes,
smiles at the clerk,
a smile sweet as figs
from iced-over trees.
I am surprised how strong she is,
she hasn't let me watch her dance for months.
Is this the teen-ager mouthing obscenities,
this girl who barely touches the earth?
She admires hand-sewn silk,
curve of steel arch.
Stronger than I knew,
she lifts her whole self,
raises *en pointe*,
body wiser than the mouth.

cause of racial justice. I have no special authority to preach on the matter, and yet I have lived long enough to recognize by whose sweat and on whose back this country has been built and why. Because of slavery and discrimination, African-Americans have provided an endless supply of cheap labor. They still work the fields, wash white babies and white octogenarians, shake drinks in country clubs, and mop floors in the classrooms in which white folks debate about race. It was no mistake that a black woman closed my dead father's eyes. It was no accident that a black woman was there when my child first opened his blue eyes. As a result of institutionalized racism, African-Americans have been cornered into doing more than their fair share of protecting, building, and preserving this land. For that reason, I suggest that even white Americans who have cursed racism have unwillingly and perhaps unwittingly benefited from it. Thus, whites are in no position to slough off the call for an apology by insisting that they have no connection to slavery.

The Hebrew Scriptures ring with intimations that blessings and blandishments can be passed on from generation to generation. For one of myriad examples, the children of Abraham are blessed because of Abraham's faith. On the other side of the ledger, there was clearly a point in time when the Israelites believed that the sins of the father would be punishable unto the fourth generation. The revolutionary prophet Ezekiel inveighs against the notion of cross-generational responsibility. Attempting to focus his people's attention on their individual actions, Ezekiel proclaims that if a man has a son "who has seen all the sins that his father has done, considers and does not do likewise...he shall not die from his father's sin"(Ezekiel: 18: 14-17). When we refuse to acknowledge the harm that our community has inflicted upon others, when we the unoppressed refuse to acknowledge that, at least for a time, oppression benefits those who are not forced to walk on the other side of the street, then we fail to turn away from the sin of oppression. By turning a blind eye, the sins of the father become the sins of the more passive son. By refusing to acknowledge who has been doing what for the last four hundred years, we fail to turn away from the grievous sins of our forefathers.

Some have argued that the president should not offer an apology for slavery because such an apology would have either no impact or a negative effect. Those who worry about the negative impact of a *mea culpa* are afraid that a proclamation of regret might distract us from the task of closing the divide in opportunities that exists today between African-Americans and whites. Some fear that African-Americans will clutch onto the prize of an apology and become less persistent in their demands for initiatives intended to redress the destruction wrought by slavery and racism.

I suspect that an apology for slavery would resonate in many different ways in the African-American community. While I would be unwilling to predict the political effects of a statement of regret, there is, I think, little reason to worry about people being lulled to sleep by it. Either way, if the president is still considering offering such a gesture, he ought not to put too much weight on the potential impact of the apology.

If acts of collective repentance make any sense at all it is on the basis of their kinship to individual expressions of repentance. When an individual repents, he acknowledges culpability and regret for harms that he has visited upon someone else. In the Judeo-Christian tradition it is believed that once an apology is offered, it is the moral responsibility of the person transgressed against to decide whether or not to accept that apology. (Apropos of this point, legal scholar Patricia Williams offered a powerful argument to the conclusion that if an apology is tendered, blacks ought to politely refuse to accept it [*The Nation*, July 14, 1997].) Nowhere in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament is there counsel to the effect that asking for forgiveness is conditioned on our expression of repentance falling on welcoming ears. □

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BLACK & AMERICAN: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

It means you learn to improvise

Clifford Thompson

When I left my adopted home of New York City to go to Spain, in 1991, I was twenty-seven years old—young, but not as young as before. At twenty-seven we sense that certain things must be embarked upon soon or they will not be undertaken at all. For me, that meant living outside the United States. Since I fancied myself a serious black writer, it seemed to me that to live abroad for a while was an important rite of passage. Richard Wright had done it; Chester Himes had done it; James Baldwin had done it. I would do it.

Of the writers whose work I knew then, James Baldwin influenced me the most. I had read almost everything he had published, including his essay "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American." Baldwin went to Europe to find out how his experience as a black American "could be made to connect [him] with other people instead of dividing [him] from them." It was in Europe that Baldwin found, much to his astonishment, that he was "as American as any Texas G.I."

At twenty-seven, I felt it important to experience something similar. It didn't matter that I was trailing Baldwin four decades later, or that I was not particularly conscious of my own need to locate and define my Americanness. If James Baldwin thought it was a good idea to go to Europe, that was enough for me. I did not know that what I then regarded as an intellectual and bookish quest—the search for my Americanness—would soon become a spiritual need: an almost desperate search for some way to make sense of my heritage.

All that came later. In January 1991, blissfully unconcerned with what might lie ahead, having quit my job and given up my Harlem apartment, I flew with my girlfriend to Barcelona, the city of wonderfully weird buildings, *siestas*, motorscooters, beer with breakfast, 10:00 P.M. dinners, dirt-cheap wine, and unrepentant smokers.

Amy and I hit town with no jobs, no apartment, and little knowledge of Spanish. About all we had was our luggage and an open-ended reservation at a *pension*. After a month, Amy picked up some babysitting work. She also did some free-lance editing. I had a job at a language school teaching English. We moved from the *pension* to a series of apartments, and I was able to concentrate on my novel and to set about trying to make sense in Europe of what it meant to be a black American.

At first race was not much of a problem—at least not a problem in the way I was used to thinking of it. The Spaniards we dealt with treated us well; some of those we passed on the street tended to stare, but with curiosity, not hostility: the kinds of looks that a Barcelonan might get walking through the all-black Washington, D.C., neighborhood where I grew up. I didn't witness or hear about any race-related violence. On the other hand, I didn't see enough black people on an average day to form a decent poker game, much less constitute a group large enough for the Spanish to have an attitude about. One afternoon, for example, I sat in my classroom waiting for three new high-school kids. When the first one saw me, his expression— before he had time to change it — gave me a rough idea of how few blacks he had encountered. His reaction was something I don't think could have occurred in the United States. Whatever a white American high-school student might think of me, he has seen me before; as a black man, I am part of his world.

It soon became apparent to me that being a black man in Europe was different from being a black man in America. But unlike Baldwin, I had yet to discover to what extent my own sensibility was uniquely American. Nor was I to remain in Spain long enough to do so. Amy and I survived in Barcelona, but our preoccupation with just making ends meet left little energy to embrace Spanish culture or to find out about Spanish people. We began to question the purpose of just getting by in a foreign country. After half a year, we were back in the United States.

I had not found what I had sought in Spain—the key to how I personally fit into my native country. What hampered my search was that I looked on the matter as academic. I didn't need this knowledge, whose purpose was to help me confront the challenges I faced as a black American. Because, had I given it any thought, I would have realized that I already had a way of doing this. Boiled down, my beliefs were (1) that aside from advantages or burdens placed on them by society, all people were essentially the same; (2) that I should treat any

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person accordingly, until or unless that person gave me a reason to do otherwise; and (3) that I should receive the same treatment in return. I still adhere to that system. I think it's a good way to deal with people, as far as it goes. But in a nation as color- and origin-conscious as ours, such beliefs don't go far enough. And for a black American to be in a white society without adequate mental defenses is like being on a football field without a helmet or shoulder pads. Calamity may be avoided for a down or two, but eventually....

The night I was laid out on the American racial/ethnic playing field in April 1993, was when Amy and I (married by now) were invited to attend our first Seder. Of the seven or eight people present, we were the only non-Jews. I was the only black person, a fact that in itself made me neither happy nor unhappy. During the meal, everyone participated in the readings, which I found interesting and enjoyable. It was when the ceremonial portion of the evening was over and the after-dinner chit-chat began that a crushing realization came home to me. Talk had turned to memories of Jewish camp songs and other shared cultural experiences, memories I did not have. As the reminiscing continued, a sadness came over me. It was not so much that I felt excluded from the conversation, but rather that I couldn't imagine participating in a similar evening with any of my African-American friends. Sure, we laughed together over black fads, films, and hair-care products from the 1970s. But what was the black American equivalent of a Jewish camp song? What shared memory constituted our celebration of ourselves? Our Seder?

At some point during the evening, one woman commented to another, "It's cool that you and I just met but we have this in common." Was there really no positive tradition that most blacks had in common? I asked myself. There was Kwanzaa, an annual celebration developed recently—too recently for me to have embraced it as a tradition. The more I thought about it, the worse my mood became, and the quieter I got. Finally, a woman turned to Amy and me and said, "You guys aren't holding up your end of the conversation!" I am a gentle man; by the time I left the Seder I felt capable of violence.

For the Seder had not only made me realize that I was without any sacred traditions: it made me see that I knew of no sufficient basis for such traditions. The full force of having failed to discover what and where I had come from and who I was had hit me. James Baldwin had realized he was an American by going to Europe. By contrasting himself with what he was not, Baldwin discovered what he was. That plan had not worked for me. The Seder made me understand, on a deep emotional level, that I needed to feel my roots, my connections to others. I had not found those connections in Spain. I felt that if I was an American, I was one by virtue of being nothing else—an American by default.

I was not ignorant of black American history. I knew the stories of individual achievement, the stories of Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and others, and I was proud of them. But all of that felt fragmentary, not like the solid earth on which a real tradition rested, but more like separate bits and pieces of information—set against a backdrop of slavery, poverty, victimization, and plain old bad luck—that finally did not cohere. What I needed was something that would connect the dots, something that would show me the full picture of my heritage as a Seder does for Jews.

Eventually, it happened—and predictably, it came about through reading. That is, I found a writer capable of giving me a complete picture of what it means to be both black and American. Baldwin had told me why he was an American. Albert Murray, the essayist, novelist, and cultural critic, author of *The Omni-Americans*, *Stomping the Blues*, *The Blue Devils of Nada*, and a half-dozen other books, helped me understand how I was one as well. Through Murray's books, and through personal contact with him, I came to recognize and value the achievements of black Americans—the unique cultural contribution we have made to this country. Murray reminded me of how, in the face of so much misery, my ancestors had demonstrated a remarkable resourcefulness.

"Resourceful" means being "capable of devising ways and means" — in a sense, being able to create a way where none exists. Making one's way against the odds is a quintessentially American idea, and America's blacks are a quintessentially American people. As Murray wrote in *The Omni-Americans*, "The legendary exploits of white U.S. backwoodsmen, keelboatmen, and prairie schoonermen . . . become relatively safe when one sets them beside the breathtaking escapes of the fugitive slave beating his way south to Florida, west to the Indians, and north to far away Canada through swamp and town alike seeking *freedom*—nobody was chasing Daniel Boone!"

Best of all, this resourcefulness was not merely an idea and a history—it had been turned into a celebration. That celebration is called jazz. And miracle of miracles, jazz was already a big part of my life. I couldn't claim to be an expert on jazz, but I had listened to it and enjoyed it for years. Jazz was even the subject of the novel I had begun in Spain. I had fallen for the sound of jazz without truly understanding the way in which it embodied my heritage. Now, with Murray's help, I saw that connection clearly. The Founding Fathers had created a set of rules and profited by them, along with much of the nation. American descendants of Africans had followed those same rules, and added something uniquely their own. Think of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, Frederick Douglass and the abolitionist movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights struggle. Each pushed the envelope a bit; each wanted to make America more than it was. That yearning for more found its way into music. The black American creators of jazz took existing musical forms and turned them inside out to make something entirely new. Whereas classical and popular musicians played the notes that were on the page, jazzmen—within the structure of a given piece of music—joined their instrumental

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mastery with their powers of improvisation (resourcefulness!) to create art *on the spot*. Jazz, simply put, was black resourcefulness set to music: both the product of and a metaphor for the black American experience.

Once I finally understood this, I listened to jazz with new ears. And this time, ironically—after having searched for evidence of a unified tradition—I found that I was hearing each tune not as a collective sound but as the work of individual people. I marveled at the dexterity of the alto saxophonists Charlie Parker and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley and of the trumpeter Clifford Brown. I fell in love with the sound of the tenor saxophone—with the reverberations of Coleman Hawkins, the Spartan purity of Lester Young; the breath and earth of Ben Webster, the elegant buzz of Dexter Gordon. For me, listening to jazz became a revelation; almost, dare I say it, a religion.

What have I gained by such self-discovery? Well, for one thing, it has made me secure enough in my own identity to explore other people's worlds. I have now begun to study the histories of other peoples, while continuing to bone up on my own. Who knows, even if I never make it back to Spain, some day I may be invited to another Seder. □

SCREEN

Richard Alleva

SHIPS IN THE NIGHT

'Amistad' & 'Titanic'

Well in advance of *Amistad*'s release, the mills of publicity let us know that this film would confirm the new maturity Steven Spielberg had displayed in *Schindler's List*. But it seems to me that what is great in the new movie (and some of it is great) resembles the sort of daydream a bright child might have right after an exciting history lesson. What Spielberg has wrought is much simpler than what a sophisticated director like Bruce Beresford might produce. It doesn't have the moral complexity and layered characterizations of Beresford's *Breaker Morant* or the sense that the past is truly another country that made *Black Robe* and *King David* so excitingly strange. And certainly in Beresford's hands a multifaceted figure like Henry Clay wouldn't have been presented as the straightforward villain that Spielberg gives us.

Yet, if the *Amistad* we've got is relatively simple (except for the director's technical virtuosity), even naïve, parts of it are as unforgettable as the best illustrations (by N.C.Wyeth, say, or Leonard Everett Fisher) in a child's classic. Only a great image-maker could have created the opening sequence of the revolt of the abducted Africans and their frustrated attempt to sail the slave ship *Amistad* back to their homeland in Sierra Leone.

The very first shot, a shadowy close-up of the revolt's leader, Cinqué (embodied by the immensely imposing Djimon Hounsou), as he strains to pick the lock of his chains, gives us an unforgettable picture of fettered strength, a sort of black Samson Agonistes, that both encapsulates the horror of slavery and alerts us to the fury about to explode. The staging of the ensuing battle is everything it should be: exciting, sufficiently bloody, both exhilarating and foreboding. And the following scenes of the attempt to get the *Amistad* back to Africa (with two hostage Spanish slavers covertly deflecting it toward North America) are eerily beautiful, especially the nocturnal moment when the slave ship, lights doused to conceal its identity, crosses paths with a European vessel, aboard which well-coifed, wealthy passengers are enjoying a string quartet on deck. In a tableau worthy of Géricault, a little piece of Europe and a little piece of Africa silently regard each other in starlight on the Atlantic Ocean. The first twenty minutes of *Amistad* are sheer magic.

But once the Africans are captured by American sailors and brought to Connecticut for the first of three trials, the movie never again attains that level of sustained wonderment. How could it? The first twenty minutes is all adventure and physical excitement—the very aspect of history that a child revels in— while the rest of the movie is concerned with trials, treaties, evidence, oratory, political conniving, crises of conscience, the letter and spirit of the law. This is the stuff of the adult world, and Spielberg can only transform bits and pieces of this world into the material of his unique internal wonderland. The good citizen is awake inside the director but only intermittently feeds the dreaming child-artist. So, by fits and starts, *Amistad* grips and enchants. The rest of it is mildly interesting professional filmmaking.

Aside from the opening, most of the best moments express the bewilderment, horror, and wonder the Africans feel at being transported to a New England that, for them, might as well be the far side of the moon. Seeing a freed black drive a buggy through the streets of New London, the prisoners feel they are looking at a chief in his royal chariot. Trying to understand the white man's religion, Cinqué and a friend study the illustrations in a New Testament, perceive the horror and power of Christ's Crucifixion, and are then alarmed, as they are herded to court, to see how masts in the harbor resemble huge crosses. Later, his gaze wandering over the courtroom and taking in several objects at random—a naval officer's epaulet, a cane resting on a gentlemanly knee—Cinqué feels a revulsion verging on nausea. The sheer foreignness of this world into which he has been hurled torments him. Spielberg's achievement (aided by the blue-gray chill of Janusz Kaminski's pho-

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tography) is to make us understand how crushing our civilization can be to a victim of it.

The weakest element is the presentation of the legal developments, or rather *lack* of developments, in the three trials. Judging strictly by what we are shown (the facts might yield a different impression), all the defense could do at all three sessions was to hammer away at the point that the defendants were captured in the country of Sierra Leone, a protectorate of England where the slave trade was forbidden. And all the prosecution could do was to keep insisting that the provenance of the defendants' capture was unknown, that they were strictly property and should be returned to their Spanish owners. Although Spielberg and his scriptwriters (David Franzoni and the uncredited Steven Zaillian) show us clearly why the government of Martin Van Buren kept prosecuting — the president was bowing to the pressure of the slave-owning states— neither the court proceedings nor the behind-the-scenes politicking achieve any high dramatic interest.

Of course, the *deus ex machina* waiting to descend at the climactic third trial is John Quincy Adams. Because of the lack of dramatic progress in the courtroom scenes, the moviemakers must work up artificial suspense by trying to make us wonder if the Great Man will intervene or not. Well, of course he does! And just in time for Anthony Hopkins (as Adams) to save us from Matthew McConaughey's feeble efforts as the principal defense lawyer (and future governor of Connecticut) Roger Baldwin. (Responding to a favorable verdict

The battle for words

Set in 1839, the plot of *Amistad* is not only about the mutiny of fifty-three African slaves on board ship off the coast of Long Island and their subsequent judicial perils, but to an equal extent it is about translation: about being isolated in one's own linguistic cell. Almost a sixth of the dialogue in *Amistad* is in Mende, the African tongue spoken by the film's hero, Cinqué, and his tribe. English subtitles are used sporadically, when their meaning advances the storyline. Otherwise, viewers are left in the dark, foreigners lost in the obscurity of ignorance. This helps generate a feeling of impotence and frustration, typical of the tourist traveling in alien lands: we know something is being said, perhaps even about us, but nothing else. By the time Cinqué is defended by John Quincy Adams before the Supreme Court, a translator, perfectly bilingual in Mende and English, has been found.

That a Hollywood film takes a risk of alienating a considerable portion of its public by introducing a foreign language (*Dances with Wolves* did so successfully) is commendable. But even more meritorious here is the role the translator is called to play. In a desperate search, the real-estate lawyer played by Matthew McConaughey and the black abolitionist played by Morgan Freeman find a Mende speaker, having themselves memorized the decimal numbers in Mende and shouted them out loud while walking around the piers. Soon the translator becomes a central character. A one-time slave, not only is he capable of understanding Cinqué and the other slaves, but he is the only one capable of opening up substantial trust between them and the lawyers, between Africans and Americans. A friendship is forged.

Unlike Cinqué, the translator is presented as unimposing, even a bit shady. Yet he too is a hero, a language wizard who translates not word-by-word but meaning-by-meaning. He is the perfect embodiment of what Italians describe as a *traduttore, traditore*. Not that he is a traitor; on the contrary, his talent as an interpreter allows for enormous creativity as an artist, architect, and healer. For in *Amistad*, it is the translator who allows two civilizations, American and African, to find each other.

Amistad is one of the few films in recent memory to introduce an interpreter as a full-fledged character. That is sad, since translators have been prime protagonists in the clash between civilizations. Imperialism and translation go hand in hand. To conquer geographically is to dominate verbally, and the history of Western colonialism is also the history of a handful of powerful languages eclipsing scores of weaker ones. In the last segment of the film, Cinqué learns some broken English, screaming, "Give us free! Give us free!" By the end, he is able to communicate with Adams, albeit "primitively"—a term not without imperialistic undertones. Adams too is capable, in the film's grand finale, of a minimal grasp of Mende. The translator has thereupon become unnecessary.

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at one of the earlier trials, McConaughey leaps to his feet punching the air and shouting "yes!" Why didn't the actor also wear a turned-around baseball cap while he was at it?) Hopkins gives an excellent impersonation of a vinegary genius, and the careful little gestures he uses during Adams's oratory seem the neat, canny reductions of the sweeping gestures the statesman might have made in his prime. Yet Hopkins seemed to me to be toiling uphill because every time he appears the soundtrack is invaded by a musical motif redolent of patriotism, duty, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (and composed by Mr. Fourth of July himself, John Williams). This trumpet accompaniment is faint but persistent; it piously glazes every word Adams utters and it enshrines, embalms, canonizes the old statesman while poor Hopkins is simply trying to bring him to life.

I understand the intention. That musical figure represents not only Adams's greatness but the greatness of his ancestors and all the patriots who founded our country. And, in an earlier scene, much is made of the way the tradition-proud Adams empathizes with Cinqué who speaks of himself as the summation of his ancestors. But Spielberg allows the greatness of Cinqué to emanate from Djimon Hounsou himself. Why did he burden Hopkins with a musical crutch?

It comes from the need to have the cavalry ride to the rescue of the wagon train, to see the three musketeers defeat Richelieu's agents and rescue the queen's jewels, to conjure up children riding their bikes to the rescue of a cute little buddy from another planet. In short, *Amistad*, despite its R rating (the slaveship sequences necessarily feature full frontal nudity and the sexual exploitation of the African women), is essentially a children's movie, a heroic romance culled from history.

I never thought I could be so happy at the sight of an iceberg! Before it sank into the Atlantic, the ship *Titanic* split in half. Artistically speaking, so does *Titanic*, the movie. The first ninety minutes is Harlequin romance drivel starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a bohemian artist and Kate Winslet as a society debutante who cross class barriers to fall in love. The dialogue is clunky and anachronistic, the camera work conventional at best, at worst *faux* lyrical (360-degree panning around embracing lovers and that sort of thing). DiCaprio is clueless as to how a working-class boy of 1912 would move and speak, though Winslet remains fetching under 9.5 pounds of make-up.

But once that blessed frozen mountain appears, this movie goes uphill faster than the ship goes under. It's all here: the invading water and the escaping rats, the class warfare enacted over places in the lifeboats, the homicidal rages and the gallantry, the surrenders to death alongside the furious scrambling to escape it, the dimming of the lights and the undimmed music of the ship's orchestra, the dull roar of sinking steel and the shrill roar of panicked humanity, the shattering of the ship's spine followed by a great silence: the stillness of slow death in the water, the stillness of desolated survivors in the boats. Writer-director James Cameron captures everything with mastery of special effects and the deployment of a superb supporting cast. (Victor Garber is especially touching as the ship's guilt-stricken architect.) I've never seen the serendipity of catastrophe captured so well, the way the choice of running down one corridor rather than another can lead to life or death. And what I'm tempted to call moral serendipity is also touched upon: the way the same situation can call forth the best and worst in an individual. (Witness the behavior of the chief steward who enforces the vile rule of preferring the first-class passengers for the lifeboats, but who draws the line at allowing a millionaire to bribe his way ahead of women and children.)

Titanic will win the best-picture Oscar this year, but it is strictly in its second-half that James Cameron becomes the one-and-only poet of disaster movies. □

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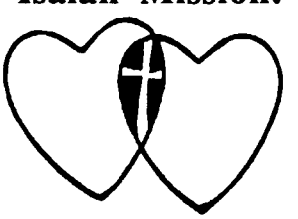

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Celia Wren

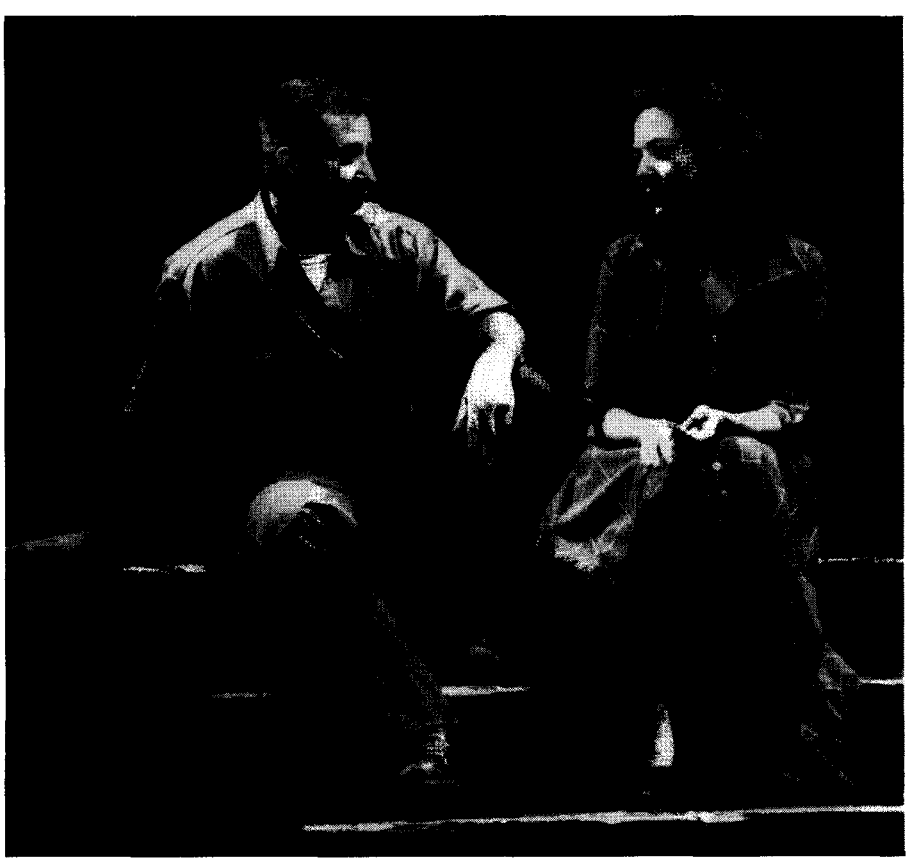
MILLER TIME

'The American Clock' & 'A View from the Bridge'

The glittering ball that plummeted toward Times Square on New Year's Eve plunged into the middle of an Arthur Miller revival. In addition to the film adaptation of *The Crucible*, the first half of last year saw a distinguished staging of Miller's 1947 work *All My Sons* at the Roundabout Theatre. Then, in September, the Signature Theatre Company launched a year's worth of Miller repertoire with *The American Clock*, his kaleidoscopic portrait of America during the Depression.

The Signature is an off-Broadway group that focuses annually on a single contemporary American playwright. In some cases, its program has helped guide a lesser-known playwright toward wider recognition; Horton Foote won the Pulitzer for his overrated play *The Young Man from Atlanta* while "in residence" at the Signature. In other cases, obscure works have received a rare airing: Sam Shepard's bizarre *Tooth of Crime* mystified audiences in a 1996 Signature coproduction. Other past Signature playwrights-in-residence have included Edward Albee and Adrienne Kennedy.

This year the Signature is able to bill its playwright as "that Living Legend of the American Stage." The company's real coup may prove to be the March premiere of a new, as-yet-untitled Miller play, but the season didn't begin badly either. *The American Clock*, written in 1980 and partially based on Studs Terkel's book *Hard Times*, is subtitled "A Vaudeville," in part because it uses popular songs of the '20s and '30s—"Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries," for example—to link together a series of colorful vignettes. Fleeting scenes unveil over forty characters weathering the Depression in varying circumstances, from the headquarters of General Electric to a sweltering Brooklyn townhouse where a family hides from a collection agent. Providing intimacy and continuity are recurrent characters like the fretting Baum family (loosely based upon Miller's own family; Laura Esterman, Jason Fisher, and Lewis J. Stadlen played the roles in the Signature production), and the bright-eyed balladeer Sidney Margolies (Chris Messina), who promises to marry his landlady's daughter in lieu of paying the rent.



The tone of *The American Clock* shifts constantly, moving from the nostalgic to the comic to the brutally dramatic, and the writing is so concentrated that personalities spring to life in the briefest of spaces. At one point, for example, Banks, a black veteran, makes one of his few appearances: "Sometimes you'd get the rumor they be hirin' in New York City, so we all went to New York City, but there wasn't nothin' in New York City....I was on a chain gang in Georgia pickin' cotton for four months just for hoboin' on a train....I still hear that train, that long low whistle, whoo-woo!"

In the Signature production, Isiah Whitlock, Jr., ushered the audience into Banks's world with this wisp of memory, staring out into space, as if mesmerized by the past. Often *The American Clock* seems to be not only about the Depression, but, more generally, about how humans recall and retrieve experience. Speeches segue from the past to the present tense, as the characters first remember, and then re-enact moments of tedium, humor, and despair. The irony that flares periodically, especially when an upbeat song like "Look for the Silver Lining" wraps up a scene about poverty, reminds the audience of the passage of time—only separation, of time or consciousness, makes irony possible.

In the recent production, which was beautifully directed by the Signature's artistic director, James Houghton, and

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had a set design by E. David Cosier, a giant picture frame embracing most of the stage alluded visibly to the limits of human perspective. The only character to speak from *outside* the frame was entrepreneur Arthur A. Robertson (Kale Browne), who sells his stock before the Crash, and takes to storing thousand-dollar bills in his shoes. A skeptic and a prophet, he gains a larger perspective by losing his faith in the American economy.

Memory, *The American Clock* points out, allows us to detect this kind of pattern in our own past, and in the collective experience of society. Memory orders jumbled images—a stolen bicycle, a basket of flowers dropped in the subway—and molds them into a story with a defined shape. Looking back, we may see one kind of belief give way to another as era succeeds era—see in the bleak mornings of the Depression, for example, the moving hand of the American clock.

Miller's views on individual and collective memory surfaced again in the final days of 1997. While the Signature season continues with the one-acts *The Last Yankee* and *I Can't Remember Anything*, another Miller revival (not part of the Signature season) is playing a few avenues away, at the Roundabout Theatre. Less experimental than *Clock*, the 1956 work *A View from the Bridge* adopts the streamlined form of an Aristotelian tragedy centered around a flawed, self-destructing hero.

The protagonist of *View* is Eddie Carbone, a rough-mannered Brooklyn dockworker haunted by a secret, sinful love for his wife's niece; when the niece falls in love with an illegal immigrant, Eddie is tempted to a terrible betrayal. In the Roundabout's wonderfully intense production (directed by Michael Mayer), Eddie is played by Anthony LaPaglia, who manages to seem simultaneously confused, clumsily appealing, and desperate, like a baited animal. As soon as you see him slicing an apple with a dinner knife, in the first act, you know he is doomed.

Eddie's incestuous yearning pits him against the community—a vigorous presence in the Roundabout production. Men and women in period dress scurry across the stage at the conclusion of every scene, as the clamor of the waterfront—sea gulls, motors, and shouting workers—swells and fades. Toward the end of the play, the stark black set designed by David Gallo—risers surrounding a central platform—becomes an amphitheater of accusation, filled with staring crowds.

The crowd is not alone in registering guilt. In a dramatic device that seems strikingly clumsy on the surface, the recollections of Eddie's lawyer acquaintance, Alfieri, frame the tragedy. Unable to avert the catastrophe he senses approaching, Alfieri is in fact fated to become its instrument.

Stephen Spinella, who won a Tony award for his role in *Angels in America*, gives Alfieri a kind of creepy nobility, and makes the tiniest phrase and the slightest movement—a gesture with a cigar, for example—seem oracular. But his unnerving performance may still leave audiences wondering why Miller created such an ostensibly superfluous character.

The answer, again, has to do with memory. The taboos associated with Eddie's pain may make an audience reluctant to identify with him, but everyone can relate to a character whose function is simply to remember. Of course, remembering isn't simple. Alfieri's recollection has a purpose: he replays Eddie's story in order to accept and understand his own guilt in the affair. Just as Quentin in *After the Fall* recalls his responsibilities toward his suicidal wife; just as Willie Loman, in *Death of a Salesman*, dreams of his misguided choices; for the same reason that Joe Keller, in *All My Sons*, rearranges the truth to eclipse a bygone sin; so Alfieri, through memory, assesses the moral weight of the past.

Memory transforms moments of pure time into a larger pattern, into a story. This year Arthur Miller is around to remind us that each story can be, in its way, a cautionary tale. □

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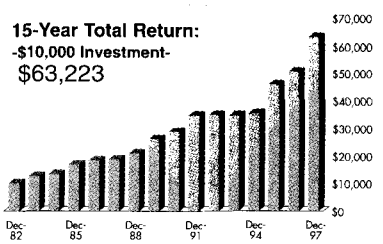

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Not bloody likely

The End of the Novel of Love
Vivian Gornick
Beacon Press, $20, 165 pp.

Sara Maitland

Vivian Gornick has a clear thesis; she embodies it in the title, and summarizes it at the end of her book: "Put romantic love at the center of a novel today, and who could be persuaded that in its pursuit the characters are going to get something large?...that we will all learn something important....No one, it seems to me. Today, I think, love as a metaphor is an act of nostalgia, not of discovery."

The End of the Novel of Love is remarkable and seductive. In the first place Gornick writes exceptionally well; her lucidity, the subtle elegance and highly crafted intimacy of tone, carry a weight of conviction. The aesthetic pleasure that I experienced inclines me to agree intellectually.

In fact I do agree intellectually, sort of. I agree that, in British and American society, the choice between marriage and passion no longer creates the tension that it used to. Leaving a marriage, for whatever reason, has lost its risk. "Today there are no penalties to pay, no world of respectability to be excommunicated from," and consequently love does not push a woman (or a man) to the point where that "suffering which brings clarity and insight" becomes operative. I agree that "all for love and the world well-lost" is pretty meaningless when you are most unlikely to lose the world. (Interestingly, Gornick's examples are uncritically "straight": she does not mention the metaphor of tabooed passions—homosexual, incestuous, or otherwise inappropriate.)

My problem is not with Gornick's working out of her thesis, but with some of her underlying assumptions. To begin with, I think she gives an excessive centrality to the novel-of-love as forming the central metaphor of self-understanding over the last two hundred years for Western men and women. For every fiction that ends with the heroine sinking into his arms, or wishing she had, or repenting that she did, or deciding to stay with what she had got, there are far more that take other subjects as their controlling metaphor. There are all the genre novels to start with, plus satirical fiction, the *bildungsroman*, and the enormous number of novels that use faith, work, politics, or magic as their core metaphor (*Robinson Crusoe, Moby Dick, War and Peace, Middlemarch, Voss, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Passage to India, Orlando, The Satanic Verses*—for starters).

I'd further question that the inadequacies of love are a discovery as new as Gornick suggests. Here is Alexandra Kollontai in the 1920s:

> How much energy and time we wasted in all our endless love tragedies and their complications! But it was also we who taught ourselves and those younger than we that love is not the most important thing in a woman's life. And that if she must choose between love and work, she should never hesitate: it is work, a woman's own creative work, that gives her the only real satisfaction and makes her life worth living.

Gornick's emphasis on love may be a cultural phenomenon. She writes, "When I was a girl the whole world believed in love." I imagine that I am about Gornick's age but I do not believe that was the message that I was given as a child; and certainly not that love was the route to female self-knowledge. And unlike Gornick, I did indeed frequently "walk into a house where I felt the parents loved each other." I lived in one. The "whole world" of Gornick's Bronx may have "believed in love," but at least some swaths of the Europe of my postwar childhood did not, at least not in the same way. Actually, I think what we were taught was that serene marriage would be the *reward* for self-knowledge gained through education plus moral and political endeavor: but that's another story.

What seems to underlie the questions I find myself needing to ask of *The End of the Novel of Love* is that Gornick has a somehow old-fashioned critical apparatus. This emerges in three specific ways. First, she seems to make no distinction between fictional characters, their authors, and other historical persons. Surely some distinction has to be drawn between Gwendolen Harlech, George Eliot, and Mary Ann Evans (Eliot's actual name).

But Gornick gives the interpretations of actual lives—Clover Adams, for example—and fictional characters like Diana Warwick as though they were identical. This confusion is increased by a classic life-and-works approach: we know what the authors *meant* by looking at their biographies. This is fun, and it's the tradition in which I was taught English literature, but I do not think it really holds water any more. Intentionality is not so straightforward. Moreover, all the postmodern work on the demands of genre, the readers' intentions, and so on cannot be written off so casually. I would have thought these considerations would be particularly strong in the case of premodern women writers.

Following from these old-fashioned critical instincts is Gornick's apparent

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certainty about how representation works: what characters do in novels is the same as what we do in reality, and reality is instructed very directly by art. I am not at all convinced by this. It is not clear to me that just because so many novels use love as a central metaphor, it necessarily follows that it is the major theme of people's lives—or *vice versa*.

Ironically, Gornick really does have a high moral view of the novel—its purpose is edification, which means for her "discovery" not "nostalgia." I am dubious about whether this is the contemporary function of the novel, and even if it would be a good thing if true. Perhaps as we venture into dangerous places of self-discovery, fiction provides a desirable haven of moral nostalgia. Perhaps novels are not about self-discovery but about emotional information. Perhaps they are about language, and not about morals at all. Reading Gornick I was frequently reminded of Angela Carter's scathing comment, "Novels are etiquette manuals for teaching young ladies how to behave in the social circles to which they aspire." Carter's unfashionable view is a possibility, at least as strong as Gornick's elevating certainty.

I am an old-fashioned moralist too. At one level I am enchanted by the ethical demands Gornick makes of both novels and readers. But it does seem a pity that she chose to publish her ideas as a collection of essays rather than work them into a book. I am quite certain, because of the intelligence of her prose and the sensitivity of her perceptions, that she is aware of these problems; but she has given herself no way to address them. The form of this essay collection itself precisely prevents the "large thing" that she so admires in fiction emerging out of some exquisite small analyses.

But it may be too late. The novel, by Carter's definition at least, is necessarily a bourgeois form. It may be not that the metaphor of love in the novel is coming to an end, but the metaphor and the place of the novel in society has run out of steam. □

Sara Maitland's *most recent book is* Angel Makers: The Collected Stories *(Henry Holt).*

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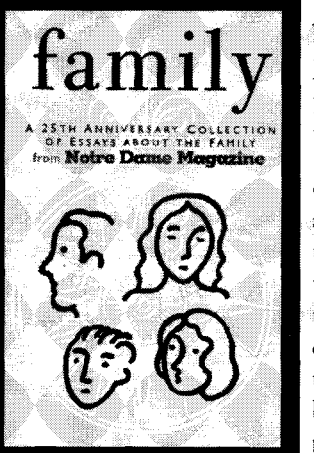

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PLACE YOUR BETS

Bob the Gambler
Frederick Barthelme
Houghton Mifflin, $23, 213 pp.

Valerie Sayers

Reading Frederick Barthelme, I often feel the way I do when I'm reading a slick magazine stuffed with glossy ads and just enough substance to cut through my guilt. After reading him, I've got sand in the bed: something's bothering me, something's keeping me awake, but the source is diffuse, irritating, hard to spot.

Barthelme's work has altered recently in small but significant ways. The stories I read in the *New Yorker* in the '70s and '80s often frustrated me precisely because of their trademark minimalisms: the jittery present tense, the flat prose, the name brands, the preoccupation with food, cars, and the surface of things. Unlike Raymond Carver, who was accused of being a minimalist himself, Barthelme was not writing about the working class and the tensions of not enough money. His New South characters (his territory is generally the Mississippi Gulf Coast) were more often than not privileged and educated, caught up in boredom and ennui. Barthelme, in his clever, mannered, ironic voice, clearly felt some sympathy for these people as he made, again and again, the fictional point that the rampant consumerism, the stuff in their lives, was clogging their very souls, but the early work often struck me as repetitive and overly conceptual. Ostensibly realistic, this fiction gave a tightly cropped view of the world. All Barthelme's characters—male and female, adult and teenager—sounded like one another, and they all sounded like the stories' narrators, bright and whimsical and given to wise-guy banter and neat closure.

Nevertheless, there's always been the sand in the bed, the sense that Barthelme was and is onto something important about contemporary life, that even in his fictional repetitions he is forcing his readers to look closely at how overwhelmed and isolated, how hungry for connection, Americans often feel. In recent years, Barthelme has let his sentences linger longer over physical details, and there's more a sense of place, especially of Biloxi, which has played such a big role in his work. The prose has become more musical. He has also paid attention to new subjects—just as you think he's blindered, writing about the South without ever mentioning race, you'll turn a page and find the subject raised; then as you wonder why none of his characters is ever interested in politics, he'll write a novel like *Painted Desert*, which immerses itself in race and politics and culture. Strange, longing references to childhood Catholicism sneak into works like *The Brothers*.

His latest novel, *Bob the Gambler*, is, naturally, about gambling. In some senses, then, it's back on the old Barthelme territory of consumerism, but there are clear signs of the deepening empathy for his characters that has marked his latest work, a sweetness of tone, a hopefulness of outlook. His protagonist here is not named Bob at all, but Ray Kaiser (the title's a reference to the film *Bob le Flambeur*, which Ray brings home from the video store). He's an architect, but not a very convincing one, since his remarks about his work are vague and general: "We had a lot of ideas for this house, but whenever I drew it up the place looked remarkably unexotic. " This is a quibble, however, for Ray's architectural practice is failing at the beginning of the novel anyway, and he and his wife Jewel make utterly believable gamblers. They are also gamblers with whom readers are bound to sympathize, gamblers whose actions are completely predictable or, maybe, inevitable—at least once they've set themselves in motion.

From the beginning, Barthelme sets up a parallel between the decline of Ray and Jewel and the decline of Jewel's fourteen-year-old daughter, RV (the name is never explained, but maybe it doesn't need to be). RV is a great presence in the book, a focal point beyond themselves for Ray and Jewel, who at the beginning of their foray ignore the girl's obvious pleas for attention (in a good objectification of her need, she's always hungry, and her parents have always forgotten about dinner). While RV plays around with vodka and cars and a Motel 6, Ray and Jewel have fallen under the spell of the Paradise Casino (another neon sign of a name), lovingly and wittily described. Early on, we meet a character named Baby whose first husband has died in the Paradise, and we don't need any further signal that this is a novel about the kind of death that gambling can bring on.

Barthelme makes funny references to Dostoevski's obsessions with gambling and has Ray construct his own funny running commentary about betting. "I sort of felt it was more exhilarating to lose a lot than win a little," he says. "Losing meant you had to play more, try harder. Losing burned intensely; winning became tepid fast." Eventually, Ray spends one long night of the soul losing every piece of credit he can get his hands on. Barthelme's description of that night is an exhilarating wonder. When Ray sets fire to present and future, ennui goes up in flames, and Barthelme is absolutely convincing about Ray's need to destroy the empty, vapid security he has built up.

Ray and Jewel and RV sell all their possessions and move in with Ray's mother, a good, quirky, character who's faced her own dark night when her husband, whom she's left, died alone in a Houston condo. The family, stripped of its material goods, finds a center (and begins eating dinner again). The gambling, which the reader has almost certainly experienced with dread, has functioned as a cleansing fire in the end, and the story (except for its strange elliptical conclusion, which I found frustrating in the old-Barthelme way) is full of redemptive possibility.

Bob the Gambler is openly sympathetic to its characters and their longing for meaning. There is something more en-

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gaged in Barthelme's later work, and especially in this novel, something more purposeful, something less irritating, more satisfying. It's as if, this time around, Barthelme has accompanied Ray on his scary, funny, crucial journey. He's not standing on the sidelines, amused and ironic, anymore. □

Valerie Sayers *is professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. Her latest novel is* Brain Fever *(Doubleday).*

WHOM DO WE TRUST?

Authority
The Most Misunderstood Idea in America
Eugene Kennedy and Sara C. Charles
The Free Press, $25, 244 pp.

The Problem of Trust
Adam B. Seligman
Princeton University Press, $29.95, 224 pp.

Carl L. Bankston III

Talcott Parsons, the grand theorist of American sociology from the thirties through the fifties, described maintaining order as a central problem of any social system. Since human beings achieve their goals by working together, there must be forces that hold them together and direct their efforts toward common purposes. Order can be oppressive as well as functional, though, and social thinkers for the past twenty to thirty years have tended to be more concerned with issues of personal liberation and distributive justice than with questions of cooperation and collective efficiency. Recent publications, such as Dennis Wrong's masterly *The Problem of Order* (Basic Books, 1994), suggest that attention is turning once again, however, to how a well-ordered society is established and maintained.

The husband-and-wife team of Eugene Kennedy, a psychologist and author of numerous books on religious and social issues, and Sara C. Charles, a prominent psychiatrist, look at one element of a well-ordered society in their discussion of the concept of authority. Authority, they argue, should be clearly distinguished from authoritarianism. Authoritarianism, in their view, involves conformity imposed from above by hierarchies. Authority, by contrast, involves the agency of an author, someone who promotes growth by giving meaning and shape to human relationships. Americans misunderstand and misinterpret authority because they confuse it with authoritarianism, which has become unacceptable in today's posthierarchical world.

Kennedy and Charles describe what they call the "de-authorization" of various American institutions: marriage and family, education, the workplace and the professions, government, business, religion, and law. After examining these institutions, they offer suggestions for rediscovering authority in each. For example, they argue that breaking the link between marriage and sex has resulted in a loss of the authority of marriage. Men and women need to reestablish this link in order to restore the health of family life.

The distinction between authority and authoritarianism may be a useful contribution to the notion of social order and this book offers many other insightful observations. Still, Kennedy and Charles never manage to say precisely what authority is, aside from describing it as "a positive, dynamic force ordered to growth." As a result, the concept remains vague and the term "de-authorization" tends to be used as a magic key that unlocks the secret of every current social problem. The book's recommendations for solving problems often seem like the type of nostrums peddled by management consultants

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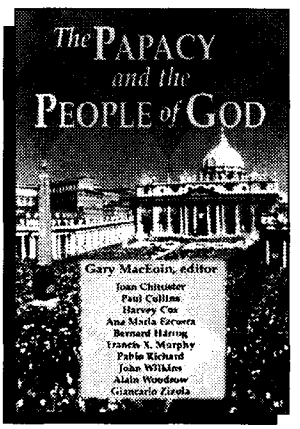

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and after-dinner speakers. We can rediscover authority at work, they suggest, if managers will treat workers as adults and use common sense in making decisions. Such bland moral exhortations, I believe, trivialize the difficulties social change presents to American institutions.

Adam Seligman, a professor in the Department of Religion at Boston University, analyzes another element of a well-ordered society: trust. *The Problem of Trust* is a demanding, closely reasoned, scholarly work, and I would not recommend it for killing time while waiting for the bus. It is well worth the time of patient, attentive readers, though, since "trust" has become a major topic in contemporary literature on social order, a central concern of writers such as Francis Fukuyama and Niklas Luhmann.

Seligman seeks to explain precisely what trust is and how trust is developed. He carefully distinguishes trust from confidence and faith. We have confidence in others when their social roles are so well-established that we can predict their behavior. Cooperation in premodern societies, he argues, is based less on trust than on secure role expectations. Faith, at the other extreme from cooperation, is a relationship with an unknowable transcendent other, God. Trust, says Seligman, is a secular phenomenon that has emerged at the margins of systematic role expectations. We can only trust other humans, that is, to the extent that we do not know just what they will do.

In Seligman's view, trust as a principle for the organization of social life is a modern development. Trust is rooted in ideas of private conscience and individual agency that developed, in the West, through the influence of Christianity. It only began to be a dominant form of social organization, though, with the emergence of the idea of a civil society in the early eighteenth century. In the civil society, negotiation and contract between private individuals, based on the internal promptings of conscience, became social bonds.

If trust is based on modernity, what will become of it in our "postmodern" era, in which the autonomous individual is allegedly disappearing? Seligman is decidedly pessimistic about the future of trust. He argues that the traditional realm of the morally autonomous individual is shrinking as group identities, expressed through contemporary identity politics, and external controls, such as laws, govern increasing areas of our civic lives.

Seligman's effort at narrowly defining trust enables him to avoid the conceptual fuzziness of Kennedy's and Charles's discussion of authority. Still, it would be helpful to give more attention to how trust may be related to other principles for ordering human relations. Some degree of confidence in the socially defined roles of others, for example, may make it worth the risk of extending trust. Similarly, the uncertainty of relations among people can be limited by a common basis in religious faith. Moreover, we might see trust, faith, and confidence as supporting one another in varying combinations instead of being mere external sanctions exclusive of one another. If trust has been the guiding principle of the modern market society, then perhaps it needs to be supplemented by other principles. Adam Smith as well as Karl Marx recognized that societies based chiefly on contractual agreements among private individuals can entail a great deal of public misery.

One point that remains unclear in these two books is why people seek to establish varying types of social ties at different historical times and in different places. Kennedy and Charles and Seligman would have done well to have taken into consideration one of Dennis Wrong's key insights: all explanations of social order presuppose some theory of human nature and human motivation. We can only identify the situations that promote bonds of authority or bonds of trust among individuals if we first have an idea of what leads people to seek bonds with one another. Put simply, what are people trying to get out of their jobs and marriages that may lead them to invest these institutions with authority and what are they trying to get out of one another that makes it worth the trouble and risk of trust?

At a time when irony has become a prevailing attitude toward social institutions, the serious concern with the bonds of authority and the bonds of trust evident in these two new books can help us think about how to rebuild the subverted foundations of our social order. □

Carl L. Bankston III *teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Southeastern Louisiana.*

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BLACK & BLUE

Patrick Hall

You don't need a university study to determine who are the most frequent victims of crime in the inner city and who are its perpetrators. It is African-American criminals, not racist police, who break into African-American homes to steal the little that we have. It is African-American criminals who kill their brothers over twenty dollars. It is African-American criminals who rape your daughter. Black-on-black crime is the culprit, and it scares the hell out of me every time I get out of my car at night.

Yes, I have been harassed by the police for doing little more than turning around in a stranger's driveway in an affluent part of town. And yes, I know that there has always been an adversarial relationship between a certain element in most metropolitan police units and inner-city residents. But if we blacks were honest, we would admit that despite the exploits of a few racist jerks on any police force, the police are not the most immediate threat to the health and well-being of African-Americans.

To be blunt, we have met the enemy and they are sometimes us. From Buffalo, New York, to Modesto, California, and from Atlanta to Chicago, and yes, even in South Bend, Indiana, where I live, the black criminal is the clear and present danger, and most black folks know this to be true. We have been encouraged by the Jesse Jacksons and Al Sharptons of this world to focus on the police as one of our main problems. But hell, the police have never stolen my license plates—and they *have* been stolen.

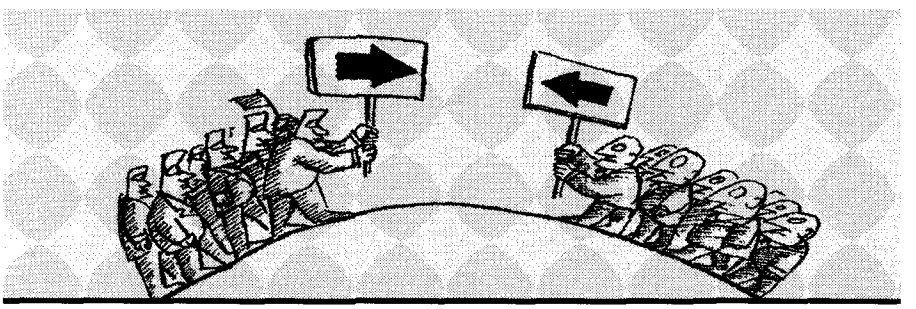
When the police officer came out to my home to investigate the robbery, I had a discussion with him. He has worked in my neighborhood for twenty years and has seen things go from bad to worse to completely awful. He expresses a deep concern about the majority of law-abiding inner-city residents who are being victimized, but feels his hands are tied by questionable charges of police brutality. In more than one incident over the past year, he says, officers have been taken to court because they used force to stop a pusher who was known to be selling drugs to junior-high-school students. The unspoken attitude developing in his precinct, he says, is not to intervene in situations that may call for the use of force when perpetrators are black.

I believe that the political, moral, and socio-economic attention that the charge of police brutality creates is especially intoxicating for too many African-American leaders on both the local and national levels. They use it as a springboard to enhance their status as spokespersons for the black community in an intractably racist society. But they are never really challenged to look at what black communities are doing to stop black-on-black crime. It is always easier to blame someone else or something else. That is human nature. As my favorite Eurocentric dead white male, William Shakespeare, says, "the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Of course, it is obvious to any of us who live in inner-city neighborhoods that black-on-black crime, dope pushers in our schools, and disruptive teen-agers in the classrooms do the most cataclysmic harm to the civility of our community. Why do we keep vicious dogs in our yards? Not to stop the police but to protect us against criminals. Why do we buy security systems for our homes? Not to stop the police! When I arrive home late each night from work and I'm putting the car away in the back alley, I am not worried about the police jumping out, shooting me, and stealing my vehicle. I am looking over my shoulder for "criminal black folks." Until we stop this dangerous charade of demonizing the very people who are sworn to protect us, the problems within the inner city will continue to fester.

We in the African-American community have cried wolf so often that we have inadvertently made our own neighborhoods more unsafe. If the police hesitate to act against the violence and incivility in many inner-city communities, who can really blame them? Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) have been conspicuously present at events involving police brutality and police misconduct, but they don't have to personally subdue some low-life who sells drugs to our kids.

Let me be absolutely clear here. Yes, police brutality exists, the cases of Rodney King and Abner Louima testify to it, and it must be stopped. But to focus on a few incidents and refuse to support the vast majority of police officers who want to combat crime in black neighborhoods is not only misguided racial politics, it is downright deadly to those of us who live there. □



Patrick Hall *is the coordinator of research instruction at the University of Notre Dame.*

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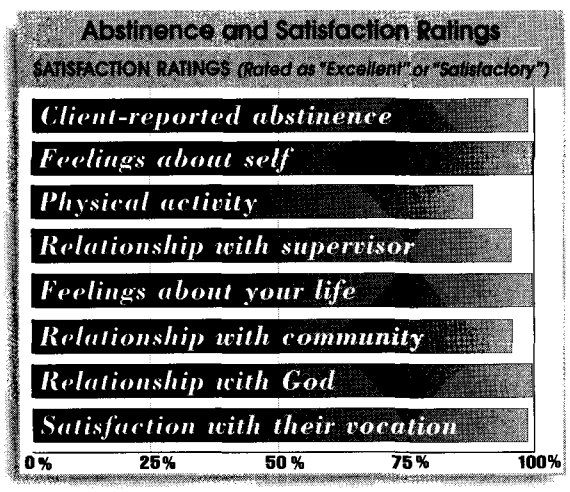

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